Developing a Critically Inclusive Study of Religion

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DECLARATION

I, Gaelin Meyer, hereby declare that the work on which this dissertation is based is my original work (except where acknowledgements indicate otherwise) and that neither the whole work nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university.

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Signed by candidate

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May the journey become ever lighter.

ABSTRACT

The scientific, or secular, study of religion is a relatively new endeavour, and has faced multiple obstacles over the course of its development. The primary challenge has consisted of the need to distinguish the secular study of religion from the theological study of religion. The commitment to exclusive humanism has played a foundational role in this process. This form of humanism developed during Europe's colonial era, and helps to cement the modern secular worldview. That said, there are critical material scholars who attempt to move beyond the strictures of their colonial inheritance. New models for examining the materiality of religion have followed the integration of new materialist theory into critical religion research. Along with new material approaches, the way opens to posthuman studies of religion. This allows scholars to critically engage with the outdated and racialised categories that emerged in 19th century humanist discourse. However, the domain of posthuman studies is not altogether free of colonial baggage, and this shows in the dearth of black and indigenous voices in the field. Both the material study of religion, and the posthuman study of religion lack a coherent engagement with indigenous worlds, and therefore remain within modern colonial boundaries. These exclusions correlate with the unexamined commitment to secular rhetoric within the modern academy. As a modern construct, the secular domain makes absent the world-making practices of indigenous collectives, and renders them invisible within critical discourse. To remedy this, I point to the work of nonmodern scholars, who present alternate ontologies and epistemologies that require attention should the critical study of religion wish to develop into an inclusive domain of academic enquiry.

THESIS INTRODUCTION

We are dynamic beings riding the wave of the present, through intimate relations of becoming. This is the world presented by the new materialist, posthuman, and indigenous thinkers who I will be reading into the study of religion. I begin my enquiry located within the rolling peaks and valleys of the present. From here I map many different configurations, in order to follow up my primary question. Does the material study of religion offer a coherent approach to the discipline as a critical endeavour?

This thesis is a cartography, a mapping of dynamic movements through time to better grasp the present, and to prepare for the possibilities of what comes next. Rosi Braidotti reminds us that cartographies "aim at epistemic and ethical accountability by unveiling the power locations which structure our subject-position" (Braidotti 2013, 164). Religious studies, as a field, grapples with the weight of accounting for past epistemic and ethical positions. I hope to provide another voice towards this accounting.

In this thesis I tackle some of the thorny problems facing the secular study of religion in the contemporary academy. As a Christocentric and Eurocentric construct, the category of religion bears the marks of imperial and colonial hegemony. In this regard, defining religion as a non-theological object of study has been fraught with difficulties. Current scholarship still grapples with the deleterious effects of the modern project on this line of enquiry, and there is not yet a coherent disciplinary stance around which critical scholars of religion might gather.

The critical approach has been pivotal to the ongoing formation of the discipline. Critical thinking locates the non-theological study of religion as a secular concern. However, I will be arguing that a non-theological approach does not simply equal a secular one. The motivation behind the critical approach is the need to uncover and deconstruct conceptual apparatus that have been accepted as given, but which are in fact erroneous. In this regard, critical studies aim at transformation. In many key regards, the critical study of religion in the 21st century has succeeded in transforming the field by investigating a myriad of hegemonic constructs that formerly defined religious studies within the academy. That said, I will argue that the conflation of non-theological religious studies with secular religious studies displays a lack of self-critique within critical discourse. It is accepted as given that any study of religion which seeks to distance itself from theology must, as a matter of course, identify with secular

ontologies and epistemologies. I will argue that there is a position beside the theological and the secular, which are themselves products of dualistic world-making practices. As long as the critical project remains within the secular/theological dichotomy, scholars are problematically bound to these exclusive constructs.

My use of the term theology is quite specific in this context. It follows the use of the term by religious studies scholars as the discipline began to take form in the late 19th century. It was the Protestant doctrinal position that defined the early academic study of religion in the modern research university. This resulted in a science of religion that attempted to judge between "good and bad religion" based on "Protestant-derived categories" and the uncritical use of Christian ontologies (Goldstein et al. 2016, 06). It is this form of theology that Goldstein et al. refer to when discussing the 'de-theologization' of the field (Goldstein et al. 2016, 07). The collapse of the domain of theology into the homogenous 'other' of secular religious studies institutes a dualism at the heart of the discipline. When I discuss the study of religion as a non-theological enterprise, I'm referring to both an academic endeavour that does not rely on Protestant-derived categories, and one that breaks free of the secular reductionist framework.

It is also important for me to note that my work is located within the academic and intellectual heritage of the global north. I am a white South African woman; my ancestors bequeathed me a hegemonic intellectual lineage and my own intellectual trajectory has emerged from this canon. That said, having been born and raised in Africa I have also been immersed in the context of the global south for as long as I can remember. I grew up surrounded by ontologies and epistemologies unlike those I encountered within my academic environment. I approach these spaces keenly aware of the debt of my socio-political locations and entanglements.

Working at the border between worlds has allowed me a closer look at the limits of the northern canon and inspires me to open up spaces and apertures within the canon itself. With a focus on religion, my thesis continues the project of addressing the colonial legacies that underly so much of my inherited frameworks. In this regard my work is positioned by, informed by and responsive to the blind spots of the canon I have inherited.

Towards this I bring the openings offered by Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola and Cameroonian anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh, who each illuminate these blind spots from their positions in the global south. The borderwork I do from my side of the canon takes inspiration from the

glimpse of the African nonmodern that these writers have afforded me. By looking to Africa, and further to indigenous cosmologies on a global scale, I hope to address the limits that define the borders of my inherited lineage. I do this towards opening up spaces for deeper conversations and dialogues.

I borrow the term 'nonmodern' from Bruno Latour, who uses it to provide a potent critique of modern world-making practices. My use of the term is towards the construction of a heuristic that can stand as a third position beside the heuristics of world-religion and the secular. Peoples whom I classify as nonmodern in this thesis are those who maintain ontological and epistemological practices associated with their indigenous lineage, despite ongoing entanglements with modern prerogatives. Nonmoderns are not anti-modern, and they are not 'primitive'. Instead, they present indigenous practices that *become nonmodern* through ongoing negotiations with the modern project.

In what follows, I discuss the development of a critically inclusive study of religion. Inclusivity in the 21st century involves making space for peoples, ideas and practices that have formerly been excluded. With inclusivity in mind, I will turn to the practices of indigenous peoples, with a focus on African indigeneity, in order to sketch out a position which is neither theological nor secular. It is my understanding that by approaching the non-theological study of religion in non-secular terms, some of the more intractable problems facing the developing discipline may be overcome.

To understand the challenges in cohering a non-theological study of religion, multiple entangled categories require critical deconstruction. This involves a closer look at the history of European Christianity, and the secular atheism that developed from these Christian foundations. As a corollary of Eurocentric and Christocentric atheism, the formation of an exclusive version of the human, coupled with Cartesian material theory, has formed the crux of the modern project.

Much work has already been done to extricate the study of religion from the theological conceptual structures put in place during the 19th and early 20th century. David Chidester's work in particular presents an important deconstruction of modern European hegemonies in the religious studies domain (Chidester 1996; 2014). Chidester makes salient the impact of colonial and Christocentric logic on the first attempts at a science of religion. I will argue that in his most recent work *Religion: Material Dynamics* (2018), Chidester provides a coherent

non-theological object of religion, along with a *sui-generis* method for the study of religion as a non-theological enterprise. This comes at a time when key critical scholars despair of ever finding stable ground on which to build religious studies as a unique discipline. As such, I will argue that Chidester's work may be pivotal in the formation of the discipline.

However, although Chidester tackles exclusive humanism, material theory, and the violent impact of European colonialism, he does not successfully transgress the limits of modern secular atheism. As such, I will argue that the study of religion that he develops, while making up for multiple weaknesses in former approaches, still remains beholden to the modern project. A critically inclusive study of religion remains to be developed.

Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies describe the material human agent as entangled in a continual process of world-making. This making of the world does not fall within the limits of the theological/secular divide, it emerges from an intrinsically holistic positionality. One of the primary features of indigenous world-making is the acknowledgement of relationality as fundamental. Within a holistic and relational cosmos, the making of the world forms an ongoing process, never complete, and structured continually through resonances, meetings and reciprocal interactions.

World-making as the primary role of material agents, be they human or nonhuman, speaks to the innate and intimate relations through which the cosmos comes to be. Importantly, the notion of world-making does not refer to the making of multiple sovereign and autonomous worlds, but rather points to the role of the material agent in the process of generating a multifarious shared reality. Indigenous practices, and the knowledges generated to sustain these practices, have been eclipsed and erased by the imperial agenda of the modern project. They have effectively been un-worlded by the construction of world-religion alongside the dichotomous development of secular rhetoric. While indigeneity is studied and catalogued, indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, and the multiple nonhuman agents that sustain them, are intrinsically reduced by the lens of secular scholarship. Towards a more inclusive approach to the study of religion, I argue that the secular mandate of critical religious studies requires significant reconsideration.

In Chapter One, I discuss the formation of non-theological religious studies as a discipline within the modern research university. For a coherent discipline to form, a stable object of study is needed, along with a discipline specific method of examining this object. Since its

inception in the late 19th century, the required consensus around the object and method for a non-theological study of religion has been missing. Some critical religion scholars have argued that there is no non-theological ground for a study of religion as a distinct enquiry (Fitzgerald 1997, Martin & Wiebe 2012). They have suggested instead that religion can be sufficiently investigated by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and historians. This has motivated a call for a dissolution of Religious Studies departments within the modern research university.

To counter this, other critical theorists focus on deconstructing the term religion, while also working towards ways in which this term can yield a coherent object of enquiry within a distinct discipline. This object is non-theological, and also definitively secular. It currently takes shape within material theory of religion, which engages critical investigations of religion based on "evidence and insights offered by bodies, things, places, and practices" (Meyer et al. 2010, 209). Alongside the formation of this object, David Chidester offers a novel and discipline-specific mode of enquiry, with his analysis of the categories, formations, and circulations of dynamic material religion (Chidester 2018). In doing so, Chidester's work provides a basis for the non-theological discipline of religious studies to remain in place alongside the other, more established human sciences.

Chidester also hints at a Latourian posthumanism in his discussion of material dynamics, pointing to the process of decentering the human in the study of religion (Chidester 2018, 12). As material religion theory moves into the territory of the posthuman, it contributes to the task of deconstructing the hegemony of exclusive humanism which underlies earlier attempts to cohere a non-theological approach. Following from this, I suggest that a closer look at the conceptual apparatus provided by posthuman discourse might prove valuable to critical material religion scholarship.

In Chapter Two, I undertake a further investigation of the construction of the exclusive human within the modern project, and the critical posthumanism that undermines this construction. The formation of exclusive humanism has played a pivotal role in the oppression and domination of indigenous collectives who were not granted rational agency according to exclusive colonial criteria. As such, the disruption of this form of humanism is essential in working towards the redress of colonial atrocities, and the re-integration of the post-colonies into the process of global knowledge production.

Critical feminist posthuman discourse provides important conceptual apparatus for moving beyond modern exclusive humanism. One of the core features of modern thinking is the necessary distinction between ontology and epistemology, the study of *being* is perforce separate from the study of *knowing*. This sets ups further distinctions, like body/mind, human/nonhuman, and subject/object (Barad 2018, 238). Donna Haraway and Karen Barad undo these distinctions through their reintegration of ontology with epistemology, allowing for the mattering of knowing-in-being (Haraway 1988; Barad 2007).

Barad further develops Haraway's presentation of 'situated-knowledge' by refiguring the goal of objectivity. She argues that the acknowledgement of knowing-in-being changes the premise of objectivity to that of *accountability* (Barad 2007, 396). Humans are accountable for the ways in which they structure their onto-epistemologies, as active material agents in the making of the world. This insight furnishes critical scholars with the means by which to address historical and contemporary onto-epistemological exclusions.

That said, I will argue that much of what posthuman scholars tout as new in terms of thinking about the world can be found already well-developed within nonmodern spaces. For example, as a domain of practice where ontology is not separate from epistemology, the Southern African principle of *ubuntu* is already occupying the spaces that posthumanists approach (Ramose 2005, 36). In this regard, critical posthumanism does not challenge the ongoing colonisation of knowledge that maintains the modern project. I argue that this rather blatant oversight is motivated by the continued presence of racialised secular commitments within the field. The hegemony on knowledge upheld by the mostly white northern canon demands explicit limits on agency. As the relational onto-epistemologies of indigenous collectives engage with the mattering of invisible and nonhuman agents, these ways of making the world remain unacknowledged within posthuman discourse. Critical posthumanists do not account for these exclusions within their discourse, and thereby miss the mark in terms of formulating an inclusive approach to knowledge-making in the 21st century.

To make sense of these aporias, Boaventura de Sousa Santos' discussion of the abyssal line is instructive (de Santos 2008). This is the line drawn between onto-epistemologies that originate in the global north, and those that originate in the global south. It is a racist colonial construct that continues to structure practice in the contemporary academy, and supports

the hegemony of secular knowledges over those knowledges that might be termed non-secular. The presence of this abyssal line is evident in the limits inscribed in both critical posthumanism and critical theory of religion. I will argue that as long as these limits remain in place, neither of these emerging discourses are able to address, or redress, key exclusions that characterise the modern project.

As a form of response, in Chapter Three I suggest adding a fourth lens to Chidester's material analysis – the acknowledgement of the material *absences* that are evident within the critical study of religion. To further investigate these absences, I work with the contributions of Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Bruno Latour, who both provide conceptual scaffolding for my argument. By reading Latour's work on the nonmodern into the critical material approach to religious studies (Latour 1993), I hope to provide the foundation for a study of religion that is neither theological nor secular.

Apart from the theology vs. secular rhetoric debate, I will argue that the nonmodern coheres around a third position, the unworlded practices of contemporary indigenous peoples. A focus on the nonmodern disrupts the modern secular/religious binary, and draws attention to an onto-epistemological space that falls outside of both theological and secular domains of enquiry. To further explicate this, I engage a discussion of the ontological turn within anthropology, which suggests many different ontologies, and a single epistemology that might make sense of them. This counters the traditional anthropological notion of many different epistemologies to make sense of one ultimate ontology. By allowing for the existence of multiple ontologies, anthropologists are able to turn their attention to agents and entities that come to exist within indigenous spaces, without having to explain how these agents are merely 'epistemological' (i.e. aspects of human understanding, and not partaking of being per se). However, this development in anthropology is not without problems.

The ontological turn has been criticized as a return to idealism, in which ideas generate substance. If any thought can contribute to the making of reality, the complexity of the ontological domain is flattened. In response, I argue that in order to avoid the outcome of ascribing reality to every possible thought and concept, Chidester's material method is paramount. In a world where anything and everything might come to matter as real, the academic project is easily overwhelmed. This changes when things are considered to gain materiality in as much as they make a difference in the material world. By analysing the

mattering of things firstly by critiquing the traditional categories they once inhabited, some order is restored to the chaos. Secondly, if dynamic onto-epistemological structures are analysed according to the formations, circulations, and absences that make them matter, then it is not merely 'thought' that structures reality, but rather the intimacies of material dynamics. From the nonmodern perspective, thought is not a transcendent construct, but part of a web of relationality that intrinsically binds mind, body and environment into an entangled system.

This leads directly to a debate on the limits of 'nature' and culture' as modern constructs. Critical theorists turn to the newly conceived *natureculture continuum* to signify the postmodern collapse of this dichotomy. However, I argue that as long as this continuum is bounded by secular onto-epistemological limits, the amalgamation of the formerly dichotomous categories of nature and culture still functions to uphold the modern project. Within the secular conception of natureculture, the un-worlded onto-epistemologies of indigenous collectives continue as a form of material absence within the study of religion. To remedy this, an inclusive approach to practices and peoples on the abyssal side of the line needs to be developed.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the formation of a non-secular and non-theological approach to the study of religion that could lay the ground for a critically inclusive discipline to develop. I also argue that this approach must rely on the development of analytical criteria which originate within nonmodern spaces. My previous three chapters have been concerned with the deconstructive border work necessary from within the northern canon. In this regard, the balance of my thesis lies on the non-abyssal side of the line, where my primary project is to find limits-that-are-also-openings. Towards this, I have focused on scholars from the global north who have begun (however unwittingly) to bridge the gap between modern and nonmodern onto-epistemologies. In my final chapter I now turn to conceptual apparatus developed by scholars in the global south. For this I am informed by the work of Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola, and the nuanced commentary that Cameroonian anthropologist, Francis Nyamnjoh, provides for engaging with Tutuola's contributions. With the bulk of my thesis laying the groundwork for a critical engagement with nonmodern worlds, I look briefly to the ways in which aporias within the northern canon can be addressed by turning to specific indigenous world-making practices.

With these thinkers as my guides, I focus on the resonances that provide a positive identity to the African nonmodern, itself comprised of multiple heterogenous practices. I do this as a form of strategic essentialism (Spivak 1996), a political act that functions to draw attention to the unifying aspects of the indigenous Africa presence, while still recognising the diversity on the continent.

There are three foundational criteria that Nyamnjoh discerns in Tutuola's novels, which he suggests underly multiple African indigenous world-making practices (Nyamnjoh 2017b). Firstly, there is the acceptance of the world as *incomplete*, and constantly in the process of development through relational engagements. Secondly, there is a prioritizing of *convivial* relationships, in which reciprocal material dynamics are expected to provide structure to the ongoing process of world-making. Thirdly, after acknowledging the necessity of convivial practices, the notion that agency must be *domesticated* naturally follows. The domestication of agency requires that individual agents accept their role as an intrinsic part of the broader collective. Finally, the world-making practices that shape these three foundational criteria unfold within a cosmos peopled by an abundance of agents, only some of which are human.

With this in mind, I argue that Chidester's material approach opens to inclusive scholarship if it is *applied along with* the lenses provided by these nonmodern criteria, and is *applied to* the nonhuman agents that matter within indigenous collectives. In so doing, the mattering of nonhuman and invisible persons might be given a place within the critical study of religion. By allowing incompleteness, conviviality and domesticity to guide the analysis of material dynamics, a non-secular study of these agents is possible.

With this process underway, it becomes evident that if scholars are to take the nonmodern seriously, an expansion of inherited secular onto-epistemologies might be needed. Beside both nature and culture, both world-religion and secular rhetoric, a rich tapestry of relation provides shape for a world that is populated by multiple agentic persons, who come to matter in complex material ways. Following this, I argue that critical theory itself requires further development. A *post-abyssal* critical theory might begin to address the constraints faced by current critical approaches, which unproblematically commit to the secular limits of the modern project. If critical thought were to move beyond the limits of both world-religion and the secular, space might be provided for the unworlded religions of the globe to matter alongside these modern constructs.

Religious studies scholars are well placed to begin this important task. Since its inception, the academic study of religion has shaped social and political realities. Many scholars have acknowledged the deleterious role that the discipline has played in historical developments. Now it becomes necessary to accept the ways that the current formation of the discipline continues to impact the making of the world. A critically inclusive study of religion is sorely needed.

CHAPTER 1 - THE CRITICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

…if we are to reopen what colonialism has closed, then the study of religion itself must be open to new possibilities.

- David Chidester

1.1. Introduction

This will primarily be a work in critical theory of religion. Throughout this thesis I will engage extensively with critical theory of religion scholar, David Chidester, whose investigation of the problems with the category 'religion' in South Africa has provided a high-water mark for the field as a whole. After dissecting various religious studies categories in a South African context, and pointing to the imperialist bias and hegemonic violence of the past in regards to the study of religion in this country, his latest work engages a dynamic material analysis of religion. The turn to a material study of religion continues a succession of turns within the academic discourse on religion, away from metaphysical and semiotic theories, towards a more empirical and therefore tractable study of religion. It also begins the disruption of the exclusive human within the remit of critical religious studies, and therefore opens the field to new possibilities of enquiry along the lines of the posthuman.

That said, although Chidester points towards the posthuman in his discussion of material dynamics, he does not attempt to transgress the secular limits that currently legitimise research in the modern academy. I will argue that moving beyond the secular domain is imperative for addressing the racial exclusions that comprised Europe's colonial developments.

The study of religion within the modern Academy is the study of *the human*. Within this human-focused study, scholarship has moved, over the centuries, from searching for the essence of religion, to mapping the semiotic structures of religious language, to uncovering the material dynamics of religious discourse and practice. While differing in many ways, and sometimes even established in opposition, these various approaches to the study of religion

all have something in common, their engagement with the modern secular turn that has been central to European thinking since the 16th century.

In this chapter, I will discuss the developments in the study of religion that led up to the material study of religion taking the center stage as the current most viable objective assessment of religious phenomena. Most material assessments of religion subscribe to an explicitly naturalist and exclusively humanist frame. These criteria arise as part of an ongoing discourse with the rest of the secular Academy. The notion of *the secular* goes hand in hand with both *modernity* and *exclusive humanism*, a trifecta of terms to describe the ongoing development of western thought. In this regard, the limits of humanism that I will be unpacking also reflect the limits of what we've come to call the secular modern world. I will be relying on the work of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad and Bruno Latour to inform my engagement with the interlocking aspects of modernity, secular world-making, and exclusive humanism.

I will argue that the exclusive humanist frame is an aspect of modern thinking that radically limits the study of religion. In a historical context, the Eurocentric category of the human excluded black and indigenous persons, and while this has changed in modern times, the notion that the human is the exclusive center of mattering in the world continues to exclude and disenfranchise those collectives who work with nonhuman agents. In addition, the secular mandate that justifies human hegemony has also been implicated in exclusions and erasures that require a critical accounting for.

That said, it remains necessary to acknowledge that these limits have been put into place expressly, in the process of carving out a place for the study of religion within modern research universities. I will not be arguing for a turn back to theology and/or classical metaphysics to remedy what I perceive as faults in the current exclusive humanist framework. Instead, I will argue that contemporary metrics used to judge whether religious studies scholarship is legitimate in the eyes of the academy is in need of investigation, deconstruction, and an affirmative reassessment of boundaries and definitions.

1.2. Religion in the Academy

The definition of the term *religion* changes over the course of European history, and has had a range of uses. From the Latin *religio* meaning to 'bind' and 'connect' (and referring also to

'scrupulousness' in relation to the gods), the modern English word *religion* has been in circulation since the 13th century, when Catholic monastic orders developed on the European continent. During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the term came to refer to a category that included Christian and non-Christian groups, and was grounded in "an idealized Protestant monotheism"[1]. Religion came to focus on a disembodied faith in a supreme deity, which involved interiorized notions of virtue, salvation, and punishment. Philosopher Charles Taylor, following sociologist Max Weber, calls the Reformation "an engine of disenchantment" (Taylor 2007, 77) which eventually gives rise to exclusive humanism.

Max Weber's theories on western social development had a great impact on 20th century scholarship. In his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2005 [1904]), Weber tracks the development of Protestant Christianity as formative in the making of the secular political and economic domain. Weber discusses the development of secular thinking as the development of *rational* thinking, and argues that the rational modern individual necessarily turns away from the 'enchanted' world of pagan practices[2]. This was first achieved with the ascendancy of monotheism in Europe, and eventually culminated in the rejection of monotheism as the basis for social order and development. In the religious studies of the mid 19th century, secularisation saw a slow move away from European Christian theology, towards the more 'neutral' metrics of the natural sciences.

Religious Studies as an academic initiative begins to take shape during the course of the 19th century, following the emergence of the modern research university. After starting in theological discourse, the modern academic discussion on religion attempts to engage secular measures to make sense of religion. When Goldstein et al. note that "the standard for our discipline" is "de-theologization" (Goldstein et al. 2016, 07), they are referring to a specific kind of theology. This is the theological position that had been present in the science of

[1] Schilbrack, Kevin, "The Concept of Religion", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/concept-religion/, accessed on 3 July 2022.

religion during its inception in the later 19th century. It is "Protestant-derived" (Goldstein et al. 2016, 06) and takes the Christian ontological lens as universal.

The modern research project has attempted multiple scientific approaches to locate the intended object of study, only to find that this object remains theologically rooted, and therefore theologically conditioned. This is problematic, as the stabilisation of an academic discipline requires a coherent object of study, along with a characteristic method of approach. Both of these foundational criteria lack consensus within the academic study of religion. Borrowing from many branches of humanist science, including the natural sciences, continental philosophy and social anthropology, modern secular religious studies scholars have continually labored to examine religion as a non-theological construct. However, towards the end of the 20th century, it became increasingly clear that a consensus around the 'science of religion' had failed to cohere. Many critical scholars argued that a non-theological religious studies was a logical impossibility. To better understand this argument, it is necessary to briefly discuss the making of the academic discipline associated with the study of religion, and the challenges it has faced from its inception.

1.2.1. The Making of the Discipline

The modern universities that are a global presence in today's world took their current form towards the end of the 19th century (Schmidt 2014, 211). They were inspired by the University of Berlin, which introduced a new model of university practice in 1810, in which students were encouraged to research and generate knowledge, rather than memorise and recite knowledge[3]. Prior to these developments, universities in Europe and colonised America were primarily Christian institutions. The "ur-modern" (Levine 2021, 05) research university of Berlin quickly became highly acclaimed, and inspired others to follow suit (Levine 2021, 05; Randeria and Wittrock 2019, 02). The worldwide shift in university structure at this time pointed to "restructurings of political order but also to epistemic shifts" (Randeria & Wittrock 2019, 02) in the academic and political domain. During this time, the development of the

[3] For more on the difference between pre and post 1810 universities in Europe and America, Emily Levine's book Allies and Rivals (2021) provides a detailed overview of the academic shift that took place.

social sciences took center stage, as scholarly interests moved towards better understanding of human practices.

The shift to the research university structure saw many new scholarly disciplines take shape. Distinct university disciplines formed around the accumulation of "associations, journals, denominations of chairs and teaching units, and sometimes research programmes" (Randeria & Wittrock 2019, 04). Sociology and economics were demarcated quite early as distinct disciplines (Randeria & Wittrock 2019, 03). With funding for modern research universities coming from state and private concerns rather than the Church, newly forming disciplines needed to make a strong case for their place at the academic table. To be admitted for consideration, they were required to engage scientific methods, and demonstrate commitment to an exclusive humanist (as opposed to religious) worldview (McCutcheon 2003; Juschka 2013). This is where the newly forming discipline of religious studies faced its greatest difficulties.

In an edited compilation entitled *Reinventing Religious Studies* (2013) Charles Vernoff notes that "a genuinely new discipline appears when (a) a distinct domain of natural or human being is clearly identified and (b) *sui generis* methods emerge" which offer "uniquely illuminating power and precision" (Vernoff 2013, 62) to the subject at hand. Generally, academic disciplines have gained identity through their distinctive approaches to "a taxonomically coherent entity" (Arnal and Braun in Arnal et al. 2014). This has been hard to find in the academic study of religion, which has "suffered from an identity crisis since its conception" (Juschka, 2013). As non-theological religious studies is a relatively new arrival, there is little consensus around issues of its intellectual composition (Capps 1995, xv). Carl Olsen in *Religious Studies, the Key Concepts* (2011) laments "the inability of scholars to agree on a definition of religion and its problematic nature" (Olsen 2011, 12) and Oliver Freiberger notes that "religious studies departments, as administrative units, often do not reflect disciplinary unity, as other departments do" (Freiberger 2019, 10). Methodological disagreements and tensions around convictional stances (both theist and atheist) have largely stymied the formation of a stable discipline so far (Freiberger 2019, 10). That said, there have been many concerted attempts to cohere new and stable grounds. These attempts cohere around the framework of the secular approach.

Philosopher Charles Taylor, in his book *A Secular Age* (2008), notes three different formations that describe the category of 'the secular' within modern discourse. Secularity 1 is concerned with the secularisation of public spaces. Secularity 2 refers to the decline of religious belief and practice, and secularity 3 refers to the "new conditions of belief" (Taylor 2007, 20) that emerged on the European continent as Protestant practice developed.[4] All three constructions of secularity are intimately entangled with developments in European history.

The development of modern secularity has accompanied the rise of a "purely self-sufficient humanism" (Taylor 2007, 18). As a European construct, the notion of the secular first emerged as part of theological discourse, in which sacred time and profane time formed a dyad referencing two separate yet entangled "dimensions of existence" (Taylor 2016, 05). This distinction underlay early discourse on 'immanence' and 'transcendence', both of which were considered to be aspects of the Christian cosmos. The human-centred immanent time frame was "where coercive justice, private property and impaired natural reason must make shift to cope with the unredeemed effects of sinful humanity" (Milbank 1990, 09). Over time, the immanent domain of existence came to be seen as self-sufficient, and therefore no longer relying on or entangled with the transcendent domain. Secular humanism began to take shape during this period, and eventually resulted in an outright denial of the existence of the transcendent domain. The transcendence of the Christian God became associated with "the supernatural" (Asad 2003, 27). In modern discourse, the secular now refers to 'the real', and everything that was once associated with transcendent religion is seen as invented, imaginary, or irrational (Taylor 2016, 05). As such, the development of European secularity has shifted the modern view of the human towards an exclusive position, in which human subjectivity is the only subjectivity that matters in the world, and the transcendence associated with Christian theology ceases to matter.

During this time, the notion of 'belief' became central to discourse on religion and the secular. With the Protestant move towards practicing internal states of grace as opposed to external performance of ritual, religion-as-belief "was deemed the highest form of religious life" (Orsi 2011, 13). Concomitantly, the newly developing nation-states of Europe took the notion of

[4] These forms of the secular are also co-current and entangled.

religion-as-belief to be the guarantee of a civic sphere free from the strictures of religion (Orsi 2011, 12). Along with the ontological and epistemological erasure of Christian transcendence, any other conceptions of reality not committed to the secular frame were also reduced, through the mechanism of 'belief', to imaginary. When secular reason rejected Christian cosmology, all other cosmologies were also considered to be irrational constructions, taking place beyond the bounds of the real. In this regard, the rise of exclusive humanism created boundaries between the modern human and all other expressions of humanity that cohered outside of the secular frame.

Charles Taylor writes that the secular version of the human is characterised by "the rise of the buffered identity" and a concomitant "interiorization" (Taylor 2007, 539) of the human self. In Taylor's model, human relations occur along a continuum, ranging from open and porous on one end, to buffered and autonomous on the other. The closure of the human, indicative of the modern position, points away from wider possible relations, and therefore also points away from the enchanted "world of spirits, demons, and moral forces which our ancestors lived in" (Taylor 2007, 26). The modern "spin towards closure" (Taylor 2007, 555) helps to cohere the exclusive humanist position that currently defines the limits of secular scholarship. Within this frame, scholars construct a world in which "the only locus of thoughts, feelings, spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans" (Taylor 2007, 30). The buffered individual has accepted a version of the world in which human agency alone is of any significance. Relationships with nonhumans, be they agents of nature or invisible agents, are unthinkable within the buffered worldview. In this regard, the exclusive human is an atheist construct, and secularism is an atheist project.

Talal Asad, in his book *Formations of the Secular* (2003), discusses secularity as structuring modern "ontology and epistemology" (Asad 2003, 21). He argues that secular thinking does not constitute a neutral approach to the world, but is in fact "a political doctrine" (Asad 2003, 01) which has been fundamental to the ascendancy of the modern project. Asad draws attention to the ways in which modern notions of the secular "mediate people's identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences" (Asad 2003, 14). As such, the domain of secular reason is shaped by the specific political outcomes that "certain people in power seek to achieve" (Asad 2003, 13). These outcomes are related to the modern effort to universalise the ownership of property along the lines of European law, and to develop the

"human subject" into "an object of social discipline" (Asad 2003, 74). As such, the realm of secular scholarship can be linked to European imperialism and later, European colonialism. It is also deeply entangled with Europe's Christocentric history.

Catholic theology undertaken as an academic endeavour developed along with the first universities that emerged in Europe during the 12th century (Wiebe 1991, 12). After the Protestant Reformation and the development of secular rhetoric, scholastic theology attempted to explain Christian convictions through techniques found within "secular learning", and centered around creating a scientific basis from which to examine the divine realities proposed by the Christian faith (Wiebe 1991, 204). This form of theology was not focused on religious experience or revelation per se, but rather attempted to be scientific, by subjecting Christian doctrine "to the same intellectual attention and treatment" given to other subjects in the university system (Wiebe 1991, 12). Although it differed from monastic theology in as much as it did not rely on spiritual experience for the explication of Christian doctrines, it was still committed to the validity and superiority of the Christian tradition.

Towards the end of the millennium, new scholarly voices emerged, calling for a study of religion that was not focused on Christian doctrine, and that would allow for an objective comparison of the many religious traditions encountered through Europe's colonial expansion. The non-theological study of religion began to take shape along with the modern research university that emerged during the 19th century. It formed in opposition to the Protestant-derived study of religion which held sway in the academic domain. Like academic theology, it also looked to secular approaches to formulate a scientific enquiry into religion. However, unlike academic theology, this new form of religious studies cohered around a commitment to atheistic ideals, and the exclusive humanism that allowed these ideals to flourish within the modern project.

1.2.2. Modern Definitions of Religion

During the 19th century, Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach (1804–1872) presented religion as "a dream, in which our own conceptions and emotions appear to us as separate existences" (Feuerbach 2023 [1854], 264). Around the same time, Karl Marx (1818-1883), compared the openings of religion to the pathology of narcotics, calling religion the 'opium' of the people. A few decades later, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) offered a definition of religion that

referred to a "belief in spiritual things" (Tylor 1920 [1871], 424), with the powerful conceptual apparatus of *belief* radically reducing the relational openings that religions lay claim to.

Towards the end of the 19th century, William James (1842 – 1910) moved the non-theological discussion on religion to the role of human experience, locating religion in the fundamental sensory openings that the human body affords. As an ultimately human phenomenon, the Jamesian object of religion was to be found in "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James 2002 [1902], 36). James has since been criticised for his sole focus on the embodied and subjective aspect of religion[5], as around the same time, Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) suggested a completely different approach, framing religion in relation to human *social* developments. For Durkheim, religion is best understood as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Durkheim 1976 [1912], 47), which emerges through social agreement. Socially motivated beliefs coupled with complex social ritual forms the object of religion for Durkheim. However, although he presented his research as scientific and therefore value-free, he reinforced a reified distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane', which reflected the particular dualism of thought that is characteristic of his European heritage[6]. At this point in history, the 'scientific' academic discourse on religion was still entangled with Christian values. Over the course of this thesis, I will argue that the secularised study of religion remains entangled with Europe's Christian history.

As the 20th century progressed, modern social theory developed further and scholars moved from notions of 'sacred' phenomena to research around 'postulated' phenomena. Melford Spiro (1920-2014), defined religion in relation to "culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Spiro 1966, 96) and Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), in the same year defined religion as "a system of symbols" (Geertz 1993 [1966], 90). Just over a decade later, Ninian Smart (1927 – 2001), continuing with the socio-cultural evaluation of

[5] The privileging of solitary experience reified religion into something that reflected an unexamined Protestant positionality.

[6]That said, "sacred" does not refer to "transcendental" or "superhuman" or "supernatural" in Durkheim, instead it references a communally shared effervescence.

religion, investigated "the focus" of religion, which he suggested was the empirical "placeholder" (Smart 1973, 15) for the openings that religion lays claim to. He defined religion as "a set of institutionalised rituals ... expressing and/or evoking central sentiments directed at a divine/trance divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment..." (Smart 1973, 15). His 'focus' category encompassed the possibilities that the porous world of religion describes, held safely in place within a buffered enquiry by the limits placed through the agnostic lens of the 'human phenomenological environment'[7]. Yet his work was judged as being *too* porous by some scholars, whose voices begin to dominate religious studies discourse towards the end of the 20th century.

Late 20th century critical scholarship argued that religion as a category exists solely within scholarly discourse, and was created for the purpose of analysis (Smith 1982). Religion was demonstrated to be "an invention and construction" (Chidester 2018, 02), which is "manufactured" (McCutcheon 1997, 04) through academic discourse, and represents no "genuine object of knowledge in the world" (Fitzgerald 2000, 21)[8]. As such, the non-theological study of religion currently faces serious questions. If religion as an object does not cohere around some essential factor, then what is being studied in the study of religion?

In what follows, I will argue that the multitude of non-theological approaches in religious studies fail to cohere a stable disciplinary presence because of the limits, both explicit and implicit, of the exclusive humanist research project. For the limits of exclusive humanism to be properly overcome, and exclusions properly accounted for, the discipline will need to look beyond both Protestant-derived theology and secular reason. Secular religious studies research takes place within the ongoing construction of the buffered modern paradigm. I will argue that these buffers, which give form to the exclusive humanist lens of enquiry, are unnecessarily limiting for the academic study of religion.

Can the secular agenda be separated from the quest to devise a non-theological study of religion? I will argue that the rejection of Protestant theological mores not simply equal the

[7] I will discuss phenomenology more extensively later in this chapter.

[8] These scholars have all contributed to the critical study of religion along lines of deconstruction, but they arrive at difference conclusions, and cannot simply be presented as a cohort.

rejection of all theistic practices the world over. It may be possible to devise a study of religion that is non-theological as well as non-secular.

While modern epistemologies "reify humans as discrete beings" (Rasmussen 2012, 187), and locate agency only within the interiority of the human self, alternate epistemologies remain more porous. Within many of the collectives on the African content, "the boundaries between the person and the physical, social, and superhuman worlds are permeable and negotiable" (Rasmussen 2012, 187). Kristina Wirtz in her discussion of Cuban folk religion mentions that "folk religious practices, diverse as they are, all share a common focus on managing relationships with a complex world of nonmaterial entities" (Wirtz 2014, 126). Florencia C. Tola notes that among Amerindian peoples there exists a relationality that figures "entities such as animals, plants, owners of honey, dead people, atmospheric phenomena" (Tola 2013, 71) as thinking, intentional persons. In the Indian subcontinent, spirits are described as having "names and personalities" (Halliburton 2005, 111) and the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia engage a "system of social relations including living humans, certain animal species, … the ancestors and other people of the sky and underworld" (Harvey 2000, 220). In these examples of current indigenous practice, agency is not limited exclusively to the human, and porous modes of relation become primary to understanding and analysing outcomes. Definitions of religion which begin with the buffered modern position cannot account for the intrinsic relationality of these practices, as long as they remain firmly secular.

Social anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh, in reference to African world-making practices, points to the role of "negotiation, concession and conviviality over maximization of pursuits by individuals" (Nyamnjoh 2001, 31). When priority is given to porous relationality rather than individual autonomy, "collaboration, coproduction and compassion are emphasised, celebrated and rewarded" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04). This aspect of world-making is overlooked and under-emphasised in a study of religion that relies on secular humanist positions. Nyamnjoh notes that the "western epistemological export that marries science and ideology in subtle ways for hegemonic purposes has dominated social science in and on Africa" (Nyamnjoh 2001, 28). In this regard the buffered epistemology that developed in Europe over the last few centuries does a disservice to practices which have developed, and continue to flourish, in locations outside of the European continent. In as much as European scholarship engages a "quest for convergence and homogeneity" (Nyamnjoh 2001, 28), African

epistemologies (and those of other non-European collectives) have been rendered "unthinkable" (Mudimbe 1988: x). Modern notions involving the "uncompromising autonomy of the individual, rights-bearing, physically discrete, monied, market-driven, materially inviolate human subject' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 03) result in impaired understandings of the relationality that is prevalent in non-European ontological and epistemological practices.

What does this mean for the study of religion? From Descartes onwards, the European human begins to identify with *itself* first and foremost as the ground of all being. The individual gaze turns inwards, and identifies with itself in a form of solipsistic self-enchantment. The science that develops from this ontological rift between the human and the rest of the world seeks not only to understand, but to predict and control the material world.

This does not mean that scientific discourse itself is problematic. Rather, various approaches to science have been formed through problematic political and social commitments in recent centuries. Many scientific projects in the last few centuries of the 2nd millennium functioned intrinsically as methods of *discrimination*, practiced within a world shaped by European colonial frameworks. Some of the most heinous discriminations of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries are due to the politico-social actions taken by European colonizers, leaning on scientific proclamations concerning race, natural order, and other hegemonic constructs. The science of religion that emerged at the close of the 19th century was an intrinsic part of this global colonial discrimination (Chidester 2014). That said, the non-theological study of religion, if it were to move beyond the limits of the secular, might still engage with scientific discourse. Through an *inclusive* non-theological lens, the exclusion of indigenous ways of knowing from the modern academy might finally be addressed.

1.2.3. The Early Science of Religion

Philologist and Sanskrit scholar Max Müller (1823 – 1900) was the first to propose a 'science of religion' as an academic venture. He based his study of religion on the classificatory schemas of linguistic theory (Müller 1882, 68). However, for Müller, the object of enquiry in religion remained divine, as typified in the Protestant[9] understanding of this word. Using

[9] Müller was raised as a Lutheran.

methods borrowed from comparative philology, Müller suggested that the science of language could offer scholars a method for analysing the divine that did not fall under the purview of theology (Müller 1882, 01). By carefully collecting the “facts of religion”, and then comparing them against each other, Muller hoped to discover “what is the true nature, the origin, and purpose of all religion” (Müller 1888, 11). He concluded that the origin of religious practices around the world could be found in “a longing after the Infinite” coupled with “a love of God” (Müller 1888, 11), a position that reflected his personal Lutheran commitments. Müllers science of religion was ultimately a theological endeavour, which looked to secular methodologies to ground the enquiry as scientific.

A different classificatory schema was suggested by the Protestant theologian Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848 – 1920), who wrote *The Manual for the Science of Religion* in 1891. He attempted to devise groupings of religious phenomena according to the empirical similarities they shared, as per the taxonomic categories of the natural sciences. He kept to his purportedly empirical agenda by looking primarily to the manifest material data of "religious acts, cult and customs" which he wrote "is the only mirror that reflects something” of the “religious ideas and sentiments" (Chantepie 1891, 69) that occur within the human phenomenological experience. He made a point of distinguishing his study of religion from the theological study of religion which takes divine revelation itself as its object. Instead, he argued that his inductive methodology allowed scientific access to the natural revelation of God as visible in empirical terms (Cox 2006, 107). For Chantepie, the object of religion was divine, but methods from the natural sciences would help make empirical sense of this divinity. The adoption of scientific methods to render the divine object of religion more tractable was sufficient for both Müller and Chantepie to argue that theirs were scientific approaches to religion that could not be equated with theology. However, while their enquiries might not have taken the form that monastic theology follows, their continued focus on theological categories derived from Christianity places them firmly within the domain of academic theology.

Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1890-1950), expanded on Chantepie’s approach to classifying and comparing religion by borrowing frameworks and methods from Husserlian phenomenology.

For Van der Leeuw as a Protestant[10] scholar, religion was the physical manifestation of a metaphysical potency that was not available for direct study. The secular examination of these manifestations was made possible by engaging the *epoche*. Van der Leeuw understood the *epoche* to mean that "no judgment is expressed concerning the objective world…in this way the observer restricts himself to pure description systematically pursued" (Van der Leeuw 1963 [1933], 646). As such, he aimed at an approach to religious studies that was free from theological judgements or commitments. For Van der Leeuw, the object of religion was divine, and the secular method for examining the manifestations of the divine object was to be found in 'pure' phenomenological description. Various phenomenologies of religion followed, as religious studies scholars engaged philosophy to give structure to their enquiries.

Arvind Sharma notes that "in the case of phenomenology, the belief does not have to be true for the person studying the religion, it has only to be accepted as true for the believer being studied" (Sharma 2013, 84). This allowed phenomenologists of religion to directly engage with theological concepts in their research. However, as the 20th century progressed, phenomenology of religion was critiqued for its implicit Christocentric approach.

Critical scholars argued that phenomenology as a method in the study of religion went beyond description, as "its epoche amounts to an a priori acceptance of some ontic religious reality even though it persistently refuses to commit itself" (Wiebe 2014, 411). Although early phenomenologists of religion attempted a non-theological accounting for religion as a phenomenon, they referred to 'the sacred' or 'the divine' without providing non-theological definitions of these concepts. In this regard, phenomenology of religion has largely been critiqued as a form of Christian theology in itself (Vasquez 2011: 89) and has not developed into the stable foundation that religious studies needs for the formation of a coherent non-theological venture. Borrowing secular methods from the western philosophical tradition was not sufficient for religious studies scholars who laboured toward a definitively scientific study of religion. As the century progressed, attention turned instead to the options for non-theological engagements with religion that could be found in the developing social sciences.

[10] Van der Leeuw was an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, and held a doctorate in theology.

What does it mean for a field to be founded on the premise that it is 'not' something else? The early academic study of religion may have "had no agreed-upon method" but, "it was of one mind about what it was not, namely Christian theology" (Schmidt 2014, 216). Although this is only the first half of the conceptual apparatus needed for the formation of a discipline, the commitment to a non-theological object in the study of religion fuelled the formation of numerous religious studies departments in the world's universities during the 2nd half of the 20th century (Capps 1995, 337). However, while there was a relative cohesion to be found in the reduction to not-theology, the generative basis of the discipline has taken longer to materialise. Separating the non-theological science of religion from the Protestant theology that preceded it has not been an easy task.

In 1975, Allan Galloway, a Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow, published an article entitled *Theology and Religious Studies: The Unity of Our Discipline,* in which he discusses mid-century developments in the university system. He frames the academic study of religion as "the young but fast-growing little sister of traditional theology" (Galloway 1975, 158). Galloway's confident welcome extended to the 'little sister' of traditional theology demonstrates that as late as the 1970's the distinction between theology and the non-theological study of religion was still fuzzy[11], despite generations of scholars attempting to devise a neutral 'science' with which to examine the religious 'object'.

The academic enthusiasm for religious studies in the 1970's, and the funding that went along with it, was relatively short lived (Raschke 2013, 54). As the 20th century drew to a close, much of what counted as objective and neutral method in the study of religion was critiqued as hegemonic and Christocentric. Secular methodologies applied to inherently theological objects still rendered the science of religion into a theological endeavour. Critical thinkers pried apart various received categories, and demonstrated them to be constructed by religious and even colonial agendas (Chidester 2008; Chidester 2011; Vasquez 2011; Capps 2013). As Walter Capps notes, even now "persistent questions remain regarding the relation of theology to religious studies, and this continues to place confusions and obstacles in the

[11] The religious studies that Galloway was professing is better understood as a second-order theology, a theology reflexively assessing itself within a "liberal humanist" academic environment (Flood 1999, 22).

pathway of further development" (Capps 2013, 45). The labour towards a discipline that is clearly distinguishable from theology remains.

1.2.4. Religion as Culture

American anthropologist Clifford Geertz proposed a framework for considering religion as a *cultural system*. In this framework, religion is understood as a form of cultural expression, with culture being defined as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (Geertz 1993, 89). In religion approached through the methods of cultural analysis, the many different religious traditions were seen to function as "outward symbols serving as receptacles of inward religious meanings, that is, of underlying beliefs, values, attitudes, and ideas of cosmic order" (Hazard 2013, 60). Scholarship then consisted in the decoding of these symbols. The object of religion in this view is the transcendent cultural sign, and the method for examining this object is cultural and textual hermeneutics. This semiotic turn in religious studies managed in some ways to move the academic study of religion another step further from its origins in theological thought, as the study of the social domain shifted focus from existing theological categories to social categories of analysis.

However, even religion-as-human-symbol was criticised for its essentialising, and possibly Christocentric, characteristics (Capps 1995, 182). Positioning religion as a "fundamentally semiotic phenomenon" (Jensen 1993: 121), many scholars had attempted to analyse religion as *only* a system of signs and signifiers, divorced from material and historical constraints. Geertz's work, as an example of this, has been problematised for contributing to "a semiotic reductionism" that sees "all forms of sociocultural activity as texts to be read" (Vasquez 2011, 212). Paul Ricœur (1913 – 2005) notes that uncritical semiotic models tend to reduce the temporal aspects of a given narrative to "underlying formal properties" (Ricœur 1981: 244). On further inspection, many of the underlying formal properties discerned by semiotic religion scholars were demonstrated to bear the marks of Christian ontologies. Semiotic analysis of symbolic categories bore the hallmarks of Protestant theology in as much as they

constructed a transcendent domain separate from the practical materials of human authority[12].

By the end of the 20th century, the process of "establishing the scientific objectivity of religious studies" (Wiebe 2014, 11) within the academy had run into difficult and very recalcitrant limits. Critical scholars noted the many key ways in which secular studies of religion were still inherently "dominated by a hidden theological agenda" (Wiebe 1989, 26). Some scholars even argued that a scientific evaluation of religious phenomena would forever be impossible, due to the 'imaginary' theological objects in question.

The study of religion as a non-theological enquiry aimed at being "neutral, objective, and scientific" (Wiebe 2014, 11). However, early attempts at a science of religion retained the Christian 'divine' as the central object of enquiry, while borrowing scientific methods of approach from other, more established disciplines. As modern research universities continued to develop in the 20th century, attention shifted to problematising the purported divine object of religion, and its theological underpinnings. However, in the search for a non-theological object, scholars of religion have consistently failed to agree. Finally, the question arises, if the object of religion is human not divine, and can be studied "in exactly the same way as any other social phenomenon" (Wiebe 2014, 12), why are there departments within the world's universities devoted to only the study of religion? Surely the non-theological study of religion dissolves "without remainder" (Fitzgerald 1997, 03) into the broader human sciences at this point in history? Many critical scholars agree this may be the case.

1.3. The Critical Study of Religion

I have been referring to critical scholarship in religion without giving an account of my usage of this term. Taking inspiration from Michel Foucault, scholars who identify as critical attempt "to show that things are not as self-evident" (Foucault 1980, 155) as the academy may believe. As such, critical scholarship involves a "flushing out" of errors in thinking and practice, in which "transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible"

[12] As Taylor notes, the exclusive humanism that underlies the secular ideal "closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond" (Taylor 2007, 638). On the other hand, Asad calls attention to the ways in which formations of the secular are themselves "transcendent", in as much as they aim to redefine and transcend "particular and differentiating practices of the self" within the purview of the modern nation state (Asad 2003, 05).

(Foucault 1980, 154). In the developing discipline of religious studies, critical thinking has been pivotal. Flushing out the theological underpinnings of various approaches to the study of religion has been an important challenge as the discipline works towards stability[13].

Critical religion scholars focus on deconstructing the category of religion itself (Goldstein 2016, 07). Some, like Timothy Fitzgerald, consider the word *religion* itself to be unsalvageable. Fitzgerald calls for an end to distinct religious studies departments on the grounds that they would never be non-theological enterprises. This critical position in the academic study of religion is suggested as the final word in the longstanding argument against theological reasoning.

That said, other critical religion scholars, engaging what Goldstein et al. have termed *critical theory of religion* (CTR), include reconstruction of the term alongside their deconstructive labours. David Chidester's work in particular is a good example of this. Critical theory of religion scholars continue with the labour of cohering a non-theological object of religion on which to base a distinct discipline.

1.3.1. Critical Religion Theory

All scholars who critique the category of religion are doing critical religions studies. Most argue that there is still a place for the term religion as a heuristic within academic discourse. Timothy Fitzgerald, however, suggests that the deconstruction of the term religion inevitably leads to the deconstruction of the academic department founded to study it. Fitzgerald writes in his book *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000) that "there is no coherent non-theological theoretical basis for the study of religion as a separate academic discipline" (Fitzgerald 2000, 03). He argues that the term religion is not a "valid analytical category" (Fitzgerald 2000, 04), as it does not designate any definitive object of enquiry. Casting a critical gaze on the history of religious studies in the academy, he writes that the early science of religion was "fundamentally a form of liberal ecumenical theology" (Fitzgerald 1997, 91), and supports this by pointing to the unproblematic reliance on theological concepts in the early literature.

[13] It must be noted that, while Christian theology has undoubtedly impacted the scientific study of religion and rendered it more ideological than scientific limits allow, there is also a troubling trend towards setting up a binary between science and religion based on scientific antipathy towards Christian theological constructs. Neither the simple acceptance of Christocentric concepts within scientific discourse on religion, nor the simplistic binary set up between religion and science furthers the discourse on religion in the current day.

Fitzgerald suggests that religion as a category "ought to dissolve without remainder into ideology or culture understood as institutionalized values and symbolic systems" (Fitzgerald 1997, 03). Following this, the study of values and systems is better done by disciplines with more academic coherence, like sociology and history studies.

Critical theorists Luther Martin and Donald Wiebe arrive at the same conclusion. In the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2012) they argue that the academic religious studies program is "an incoherent contradiction that reveals tensions between putative claims to academic status and the actual reality of continuing infiltrations of extra-scientific agendas into the field" (Martin & Wiebe 2012, 591). They discuss the many ways in which "the academic study of religion remains subservient to theology", and blame scholarly reticence for the lack of "any scientific study of religion" (Martin & Wiebe 2012, 591) in the modern academy. Martin and Wiebe argue that scholars are deluded if they still believe in the possibility of a scientific study of religion .

William Arnal and Willi Braun, in an essay entitled "The Irony of Religion" (2014), argue that religion is not a coherent category, and therefore cannot form the ground of a distinct discipline dedicated to its study (Arnal and Braun 2014, 230). These critical religion scholars are concerned that even purportedly secular studies of religion still maintain an inherent connection to a theological worldview, as they rely on the "existence of Theology as an amorphous Other" (Arnal and Braun 2014, 232) against which the identity of the scientific religious studies venture is defined. Along with Fitzgerald, these critical scholars have concluded that the study of religion, *as religion*, is impossible outside of theology.

However, by rejecting Eurocentric Christian theology as if it spoke for all religious traditions around the world, this cohort constructs the strawman of religion as a universal domain against which the secular must push. This position ignores the nuance and diversity present within traditions that originate outside of Europe, and reifies religion according to European standards. In their radical dismissal of categories that cohere within religious traditions, scholars like Fitzgerald, Martin and Wiebe display an explicit partiality. Their commitment to atheist values is a response to a partial and uniquely located version of religion. While secular uses of the term religion may currently refer to the conceptual apparatus developed in modern universities, the peoples of the world continue to engage in practices and experiences that they refer to as religious. In rejecting any of the categorical distinctions that

arise within various religious traditions, these critical religion scholars are refusing to attend to the ontological and epistemological aspects of religious practice. It appears that their refusal rests on a rejection of Christian theism. They make no attempt to account for the myriad of non-Christian categories that are active around the globe, categories that engage fundamentally non-Christian values and involve intimate forms of relation with nonhuman agents of various kinds. In their rejection of theology, critical religion scholars refuse to examine a broad range of non-Christian ontologies and epistemologies.

Religious studies scholar, Ninian Smart, proposed a "methodological agnosticism" that would allow him to work from "the platform of science" (Smart 1996: 05) in his study of religion. In response, Donald Wiebe (1991) argued that Smart's refusal to engage methodological atheism showed his unwillingness to cause offence to religious practitioners, and was therefore complicit in retaining the privilege of the Christian narrative. For Wiebe, and Fitzgerald, any theoretical position that is not explicitly atheist is implicitly theist. This misapprehension stems from the dualistic modern framework that they operate within, in which religion as a Christian construct opposes and defines nonreligion. Rather than arriving at a more nuanced position from which to study religion on a global scale, these scholars remain caught up within historical European dichotomies.

Thankfully, this is not the only critical current in the study of religion that developed as the 20th century drew to a close. While responding to the deepening critique of the category religion, other critical scholars laboured to *retain* the term within the academy. Goldstein, King and Boyarin call this approach the "critical theory of religion"(Goldstein et al. 2016, 03). As opposed to Fitzgerald's "critical religion theory"(Goldstein et al. 2016, 03), this approach allows for the generation of new theories and categories in the study of religion, and the ongoing relevance of religious studies departments in the university system. Critical theory of religion scholars work to continue developing the study of religion as a distinct domain in the modern academy, which includes retaining the term as a critical category for ongoing analysis.

1.3.2. Critical Theory of Religion

In his article entitled *Religion, Religions, Religious* (1998) J.Z. Smith notes how "religion" is not "a native category" (Smith 1998, 269), as it was constructed during European imperial expansion due to the "explosion of data" (Smith 1998, 275) generated by explorers and missionaries on colonial frontiers. However, he also notes that this category "plays the same

role in establishing a disciplinary horizon a concept such as ‘language’ plays in linguistics or ‘culture’ plays in anthropology” (Smith 1998, 281-282). As such, he affirms the continued existence of the discipline.

Russell McCutcheon argues that religious studies scholars were aiming at an impossible goal, to devise “a theory of religion as if this word names a stable, cross-cultural reality” (McCutcheon 2014, 86). McCutcheon points out that by engaging categories like ‘religion’ and ‘the sacred’ as if they were universally applicable realities, religious studies analysis continued to be filtered through the lens of western Christianity, and therefore remained ideologically suspect. In addition, he argues that any scholarly categories which rely on religious self-understandings are inherently missing the mark when it comes to an objective and legitimate assessment of what religion is. However, while he notes the “potential demise of the disciplinary study of religion" which follows “the critique of *sui generis* religion” (McCutcheon 1997, 21), he also suggests that should religious studies scholars get past “the general absence of theorizing” the field might gain some institutional coherence (McCutcheon 1997, 197).

David Chidester presents a critique of the term religion in his discussions of the politically laden histories it belongs to (1996), and in terms of the imperial and colonial context within which it was produced (2014). He also preserves the term religion in his study of religious dynamics.

These critical theorists accept the category of religion as wholly constructed, while continuing to use it as a heuristic tool at the center of disciplinary enquiry. However, there is a fair amount of internal instability amongst this cohort. In a review of *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998), Chidester remarks that the authors who contributed to the collection “were not always talking with each other” (Chidester 2000, 368). While Mark Taylor used the term ‘religious belief’ to discuss his position, Donald Lopez contributed an essay deconstructing the word ‘belief’, and concluding that it is essentially unsalvageable. Paul Stoller critiqued the juxtaposition of ‘rationality’ and ‘experience’ as dichotomous terms within the field, arguing for the place of experience within the study of religion, while later in the collection Robert Sharf argued against the use of the term ‘experience’ as a useful signifier under any circumstances.

Critical theorists of religion have agreed that retaining the term religion is necessary within the modern academy, but there is a little consensus on method or theory going forward. What consensus there is, rests on the agreement that religion as a heuristic object is still valuable to study for its distinct, albeit constructed, characteristics. In addition, there is agreement that this object is inherently non-theological. That said, as the 21st century progresses, a new form of consensus amongst critical theorists of religion appears to cohere around religion as a dynamic and material phenomenon. This follows the broader discourse on dynamic materiality that began in the global academy towards the end of the 20th century.

The academic study of religion began as a theological venture, and has struggled for decades to shed this association. As the 20th century drew to a close, some critical scholars suggested that it was impossible to conduct a scientific study of religion, as religion itself was a theological object and therefore not available as a foundation for a secular academic discipline. Others agreed that the construction of the term religion was fundamentally problematic, but began a program of revision and resuscitation, choosing to preserve the term, along with the university departments founded on it. For critical theory of religion scholars, the challenge continues to find sufficiently stable ground for a coherent study of religion. New formulations of dynamic materiality have provided a valuable position for these scholars to ground their enquiry.

1.4. Arriving at the Material

In the critical theory of religion, scholars currently engage with busy objects, lived-bodies, and systemic material dynamics. A new material object of religion begins to take shape. It is constructed, yet it remains inherently meaningful. A unique method also begins to cohere around this object, provided by David Chidester. His book *Religion: Material Dynamics* (2018) offers an innovative method for approaching the material object of religion, yielding a multitude of new data for critical analysis. With both object and method possibly in place, the non-theological discipline of religious studies may have stable grounds for continued development in the 21st century.

1.4.1. Modern Material

Although the nature of materiality has long been a topic of discussion the world over, it was during the mid 2nd millennium that Europe began to devise the specific version of material

theory that impacts the modern academy today. Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650) defined matter as a "corporeal substance" which is "extended, uniform, and inert" (Coole & Frost 2010, 07). In his *Meditations* (1641) he established a "distinction between mind and body" (Descartes 2008 [1641], 76), in which he presented the human mind as distinct and superior to the substance of the body. For Descartes, the human mind correlates directly with the Christian *soul*. The material world, *res extensa* in the Cartesian model, is made up of discrete, divisible material objects, while the human mind/soul or *res cogitans* is unique and distinct, and made of a "pure substance" (Descartes 2008 [1641], 11) that is both indivisible and immortal. This model provided a novel conceptual apparatus for European Enlightenment thinkers. Scholars of this era accepted Descartes' distinction as a prerequisite for the establishment of the secular sciences, while ignoring the Christian ontology that gave shape to Descartes convictions.

The Cartesian framework was adopted by Enlightenment scholars, who accepted that the characteristic feature of the human is the rational mind, which itself partakes of the (now sublimated) divine spark. As such, humans were understood to be of an order completely different from the animals and natural entities that were found in human environments. Having rational souls, humans mattered in a way that nothing else in reality could matter. Humans were living examples of divine rationality in a material world of soulless 'mechanical' objects.

The distinction between inert matter and rational spirit supported the construction of racial prejudices, which were then used to justify ongoing colonial impositions during the centuries that followed. The Cartesian distinction became the basis whereby the peoples of the globe were cast as "either *humanitas* or *anthropos"* (Afolayan 2023, 226). Within the lexicon of coloniality, "anthropos" referred to "lesser humans" (Mignolo 2018, 288) who, lacking rationality, "were not admitted to the house of knowledge where *humanitas* dwells" (Mignolo 2018, 289). Descartes' Christian ontology underlies the modern hierarchal distinction between human rationality and everything else (Merleau-Ponty 2001 [1968], 35). It also led to the development of the exclusive humanism that characterises the modern secular project. Europeans, at this point in history, considered themselves to be the prime example of divine rationality, and therefore to hold "the only racial perspective of knowledge" (Afolayan 2021, 05) that could be accepted within the domains of scientific reason. In addition, Christianity as

the historical religion of the European continent, was considered to be the highest form of religious expression. The practices of the indigenous peoples that were encountered during Europe's colonial expansion were perforce relegated to the bottom of the development ladder, and considered to be, at best, primitive versions of civilised European religion.

The Cartesian model prevailed until the final century of the 2nd millennium, when multiple disciplines began revising their understanding of mind and matter.

1.4.2. The New Material Turn

The study of the material of religion is not new to the field. Examination and classification of "the remnants of temples and town plans, pottery shards, coins, vestments, frescoes, and liturgical ware" (Meyer et al. 2010, 209) have long served to help researchers clarify various mythologies, rituals and religious hierarchies. What changed in the late 20th century turn to materiality is that the Cartesian limits placed on materiality began to be questioned. As a result, a post-Cartesian research project emerged in the critical study of religion which focused on the "lives of objects" (Meyer et al. 2010, 209). Critical scholars began rejecting studies of subjective and internalised 'beliefs', and turned instead to the empirical grounds offered by physical objects.

Material religion studies scholars in the 21st century study material objects "longitudinally in relation to audiences or users by tracing their social careers, the places they go and the different ways they are put to use" (Meyer et al. 2010, 209). In this dynamic post-Cartesian revision of material objects, critical theory of religion scholars find an opening that provides new analytical possibilities for the term religion.

Matthew Engelke notes in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (2012) that "the move to materiality allows us to reconsider (and resuscitate) the very concept of *religion* itself" (Engelke 2012, 209). Rather than viewing the material things of religion as secondary to the symbolic and cultural aspects of religious discourse, the idea developed that material things were inextricable from the practice and experience of religion as a systemic phenomenon (Arweck and Keenan 2006; Coleman 2006; Insoll 2011; McDannell 1995; Meyer 2008; Morgan 1998; Morgan & Promey 2001). Along with attention paid to systems of

material things in the study of religion, "the human body and its sensorium" (Hazard 2013, 59) also began to form a critical point of focus[14].

Material theorist Manuel Vasquez provides an overview of the "materialist shift in religious studies" (Vasquez 2011, 04) in which he sees the possibility of a "fully somatocentric theory of religion" (Vasquez 2011, 157) that avoids the "totalizing interpretative framework" of social constructionism (Vasquez 2011, 149). His material theory engages an "embodied realism" in which reality is seen to be "emerging from our ongoing physical-cultural interactions with the environment" (Vasquez 2011, 14). With this conceptual framework in place, he proceeds to thoroughly critique the text-based, semiotic and phenomenological approaches to the study of religion that characterised 20th century academic research.

As a critical theorist of religion, Vasquez works to preserve the efficacy of the category *religion* by locating it within a lived materiality, rather than transcendent subjectivity or a Christocentric textual analysis. For Vasquez, the object of religion is to be found in the complexities of the material body, which he argues is a nonreductive, and non-theological, ground for the study of religion. He suggests that the somatocentric study of religion provides a framework that "highlights complexity" while also allowing for the materiality of "religion as it is lived, by human beings" (Vasquez 2011, 05). He agrees with Russell McCutcheon that the term religion is constructed by scholars for the advancement of "their own institutional interests and other nationality and imperialist agendas" (Vasquez 2011, 09), but also argues that there remains "data for religion" (Vasquez 2011, 09). However, the somatocentric approach has not been unproblematically accepted within the academy.

1.4.3. Busy Things

In her 2013 article entitled "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion", American religious studies scholar, Sonia Hazard, follows a stream of materialist thought inspired by philosopher Bruno Latour's *actor-network theory*, which frames the material world as a system of complex and ongoing physical interactions, in which agency extends beyond the human and into the

[14] The focus on the human sensorium is not new in the study of religion (see Chidester's *Word and Light* published in 1992). However, the push for a neutral and objective science of religion in the early 20th century saw academic focus shift to semiotic models, which made little space for lived experience.

material world at large. In this approach, the natural and the social domains are not distinct, instead they "fuse into one another" (Latour 1992, 09), and all entities are constituted through "shifting and hybrid webs of discursive and material relations" (Blok et al. 2020, xx). In this vein, Hazard problematises approaches to material religion that continue to center human experience as the primary focus of enquiry (Hazard 2013, 59). She worries that material religion scholars "in their shared preoccupation with the human … may overlook the various activities of things" (Hazard 2013, 59). To remedy this, Hazard suggests a non-anthropocentric study of religious objects, with a focus on how "things act on humans and shape them" (Hazard 2013, 59). For Hazard "material things themselves are constitutive and generative of religious reality" (Hazard 2013, 69). Her approach ascribes a form of dynamic agency to the physical objects of religion, and attempts to cohere a critical study of religion that focuses on the dynamic relations that religious objects are capable of. This approach has become central to the critical material study of religion.

In 2005, the first issue of the journal *Material Religion* was published, with a note from the editors celebrating "a new project in the study of religious images, objects, spaces, and material practices" (Plate et al. 2005, 04). The editors suggest that "religion is what people do with material things and places, and how these structure and color experience and one's sense of oneself and others" (Plate et al. 2005, 05). The material focus on objects "avoids reifications" and reads religion as inseparable from the material "matrix or network of components" (Meyer et al. 2010, 209) that make up the human world as a whole. In the growing body of work that exemplifies critical theory of religion in the 21st century, the object of religion is not only non-theological, it is also material, and comprised of complex human relations with material objects.

As Coole and Frost note in *New Materialisms* (2010), researchers are increasingly conceptualising material phenomena "not as discrete entities or closed systems but rather as open, complex systems with porous boundaries" (Coole & Frost 2010, 13). A system is defined as "as a set of operations generated by relations between specific elements from which a new and *sui generis* reality emerges that is characterized by properties not deducible from those of the single elements themselves" (Tosini 2006, 540). When materiality is considered as a system, new structures and patterns of change become apparent.

Ervin Lazlo notes that “the principal heuristic innovation of the systems approach is what may be called "reduction to dynamics" as contrasted with "reduction to components", as practiced in the methodologies of classical science” (Lazlo & Lazlo 1997, 03). When contemporary material theorists write the world, it is presented as a dynamic and inter-related system. Considering materiality as a dynamic system, rather than an assemblage of inert parts, the domain of the material world opens to new forms of complex analysis. As such, the systems sciences have proved invaluable in the development of 21st century material theory.

The critical theory of religion that begins to cohere in the 21st century conducts a thorough deconstruction of the term religion, and then labours to reconstruct it according to more egalitarian criteria. Scholars in this cohort share a few simple agreements. Firstly, that the study of religion, whatever this object may be, is a non-theological venture. Secondly, that the domain of materiality, in which the study of religion rests on empirical/scientific metrics, offers an important way forward. As a third point of agreement, the notion of world-as-dynamic-system also conditions current critical discourse on religion. Dynamic, networked materiality provides a fecund base from which to launch new and generative studies of religion that avoid the totalising and essentialising tendences of earlier attempts. This approach to the study of religion also begins to shift understandings around the exclusivity of the human condition, and allows for the mattering of forces beside those of human rationality. In this regard, the exclusive humanism that dominated the field for much of the 20th century begins to falter.

As already noted, for a discipline to form a stable and coherent space within the modern research university, both a stable object of study and characteristic method of examination are needed (Arnal and Braun 2014). With a material object now coming into focus, a coherent and *sui generis* method for approaching this object has still been lacking. This changes with the work of David Chidester, as presented in his 2018 book *Religion, Material Dynamics*. This book is both a collection of earlier essays, going back as far as 1996, and an innovative presentation of a new way to practice the study of religion in the 21st century. David Chidester’s use of the term *dynamic* in the title of his most recent work points to his engagement with the multidisciplinary move towards *process theories* and *systems dynamics*. From a systems perspective, dynamic movement is a fundamental aspect of the world. By

discussing the dynamics of material religion, Chidester opens the study of material religion to further methodological interventions.

1.4.4. Material Dynamics

When Chidester discusses the dynamics of religion he refers to two different aspects of religious change. Firstly, historical change, which belies the snapshot approach of the phenomenologists. Secondly, the movement through space of material religion, the physical mobility of people and ideas (Chidester 2018, 08). In my understanding, he also presents a third aspect of religious change, those patterned changes which pertain within the domain of material dynamics as an organising concept. These emergent patterns are ways in which the dynamic material of religion organises itself. Through categories, which cluster around current and historical ontologies, through the dynamic forms that emerge as material boundaries, and through the ongoing material circulation of these emergent patterns, Chidester presents the material of religion in motion.

This third sense of religious dynamism provides lenses for analysing the data of material religion. By tracking and examining categories, formations, and circulations within material flows of people, ideas and institutions, Chidester outlines lenses which lend themselves to methodological developments. These lenses provide overlapping views of the dynamics of religion, and allow for novel forms of engagement with the data of material religion. In my understanding, the application of these lenses can be systematised as steps within a novel method.

Donald Wiebe argues that religious studies "fails to delineate, in any clear or precise way, a methodology peculiar to itself" (Wiebe 2014, 15). He argues that this lack of methodological consensus "jeopardizes the very existence" (Wiebe 2014, 15) of the field. In what follows I will argue that David Chidester, through his dynamic material analysis, presents practical lenses which might provide the outline of a method for the study of material religion that is unique to religious studies and could therefore help cohere the discipline. A methodology based on the three dynamic lenses that Chidester presents (categories, formations and circulations) is not one borrowed from the other social sciences, although it clearly resonates with them. It is firstly critical, but it is also generative. The deconstruction of material categories forms the starting point. Next, the discernment of material formations and

circulations provides data towards a study of religion as a dynamic material phenomenon in the 21st century.

In his earlier works, Chidester engaged a thorough deconstruction of the colonial categories that were initially used to structure the academic study of religion. In *Religion, Material Dynamics* (2018) he then asks the following question:

> Now that we know that *religion* is a modern invention, a Western construction, a colonial imposition, or an imperial expansion, how do we study religion? How do we reject yet still retain the qualifier *religious* in our study of human discourses, practices, personal experiences, and social formations? (Chidester 2018, 01)

This is the pivotal question in critical theory of religion today. For those scholars who are in favour of preserving the term religion, what methodological intervention does this term support? While the object of religion coheres around the metrics of dynamic materiality, methods that are specific to the study of material religion remain absent. An object without a method does not legitimate the formation of a discipline, and methods drafted in from other disciplines do not necessarily justify a separate department within the university system. For the ongoing coherence of religious studies as an academic venture, a unique methodological approach to the material object of religion is needed. In this regard I understand Chidester's recent work to be of great value.

Further, Chidester continues the project of moving material religion studies past modern Cartesian limits by *expanding the category of materiality* to include anything that makes a difference to the case at hand. Rather than focusing on material objects or the materiality of the lived-body, Chidester's attention is drawn to "considerations of materiality in the modern practices of law and accounting" (Chidester 2018, 14) in which materiality "refers to the conditions of a specific case, a materiality that is significant to the matter at hand and consequential to proceeding towards an outcome" (Chidester 2018, 14). He calls this a "political economy of materiality" (Chidester 2018, 14), and frames his material approach to the study of religion with the following question: What are the material conditions and consequences that govern what comes to *matter*? As such, he expands the category of 'matter' to include anything that makes a material difference in the human world. The

material of religion is *anything* which has a material relevance to the case at hand (Chidester 2018, 14).

Using this framework, Chidester is able to discuss the materiality of otherwise intractable concepts like 'the sacred', and offers an analysis of inherently theological categories from a critical, material and decidedly non-theological perspective. Firstly, the discernment of categories, which requires the scholar to pry apart ideological assumptions in already-existing categorical distinctions in the field[15]. Looking at material religion through the categories that currently exist allows for critical attention to be paid to the historical and present givens within the field. Taken as a first step towards a dynamic material analysis, this allows the religious studies scholar to engage with the limits, borders and hegemonies that cohere the categories that currently hold sway.

Once current categories of enquiry have been critiqued, he then attends to the material formations that can be discerned when viewing religion as a dynamic material system. These formations are observable when attending to the boundary conditions that form within and around the complex systems of material religion. Material formations are "configurations of power in which religious symbols, discourses, practices and institutions emerge" (Chidester 2018, 75). Chidester suggests that these formations, when mapped, provide important insights into the material "assemblies of meaning and power" (Chidester 2018, 75) that constitute religion. As examples of different kinds of material formations, he discusses culture, economy, colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid, investigating the material dynamics that make up these formations, and the ways in which religion, and the study of religion, is materially implicated in these formations. Mapping material formations provides a second step within the method that I am developing from Chidester's dynamic approach.

The third lens that Chidester's introduces involves the examination of circulations. Material circulations can be seen in the movement of material formations, as "religion in motion" (Chidester 2018, 08) in both space and time. To support this step, Chidester quotes Thomas A. Tweed, former President of the American Academy of Religion, who defines religion as

[15] Examples of this process can also be seen in Chidester's *Savage Systems* (1996) and *Empire of Religion* (2014), in which he draws attention to the impact of European imperialism and colonialism on the formations of conceptual categories, and material practices, in the early academic study of religion.

"confluences of organic-cultural flows" (Tweed in Chidester 2018, 08). In his study of circulations, he investigates the processes of "diaspora and dispersion" (Chidester 2018, 08) through which material religious practices, along with people, move around the globe, and reads religious *change and movement* into the critical theory of religion.

In materialising these dynamic aspects of religion, Chidester opens significant avenues for further critical analysis. Although all three of these lenses can be engaged simultaneously, and are inherently entangled, their usefulness as steps in a method remains. The application of his lenses maps a path for the study of religion that allows multiple phenomena to "rise to the level of materiality" (Chidester 2018, 15) without resorting to theological ontologies. More than an analysis of material objects or human bodies, Chidester offers a guide to investigating the systemic material dynamics through which religious objects and bodies are constituted. While Vasquez locates material religion in the human body, and Hazard eschews the body in favor of the vibrant object, Chidester provides a critical way forward that locates religion in emergent material systems. As such, Chidester moves beyond the popular material religion remit, by expanding the category of materiality past the limits of both human bodies and physical objects.

Chidester also provides a clear and definitive break between critical theory of religion, and the cohort of scholars committed to critical religion theory, who refuse any engagement with theological categories. William Arnal and Willi Braun, write the following:

> The proper object of Religious Studies is Religion, ostensibly a set of human expressions and performances that merits a humanistic or social-scientific analysis in accord with our academic approach to other types of human behaviors. The distinction between Theology, which presumes and addresses supernatural or divine realities, and Religious Studies, which does not, is predicated on this identification of the subject-matter of a secular, or humanistic, or scientific approach to the study of Religion, one which is not required to bow to the dictates of Theology, confessional or otherwise, nor address Theology's subject-matter, nor be bound by Theology's methods. (Arnal and Braun in Arnal et al. 2014, 230)

Through Chidester's approach, theological constructs are indeed addressed, and allowed to matter, in as much as they make material differences in the world. That said, his work is not a continuation of the theological agenda in the study of religion. As Chidester understands it, religion comes to matter through material dynamics, and therefore through the systems which constitute it. A complex and dynamic object of religion comes into view with this approach, as do the methods for engaging it. Dynamic material systems do not rely on theological conceptual apparatus, and are not restricted by Cartesian versions of materiality. Rather, they are defined in terms of human practice and engaged with according to human concerns.

As such, Chidester locates the study of religion as an endeavor that gains significance through the study of the human. Importantly, this does not place him within the domain of *exclusive* humanism. While he centers the study of religion within the domain of human materiality, he also moves beyond the limits inscribed by modern human exceptionalism. Chidester begins his discussion of material religion with a significant question. He asks, "how do human beings really fabricate the real thing? How do real things really fabricate human beings?" and notes that "in this material dialectic of fabrication, the being of the human being is at stake" (Chidester 2018, 3). By suggesting that the being of the human is at stake, he acknowledges the destabilising impact of new materialist theory on the exclusive humanism that shapes the modern project. In this regard, the bounds of the modern human are called into question, moving critical theory of religion towards the domain of *posthuman* discourse.

1.4.5. Latour's Material

Although Chidester does not take his posthuman discussion further than posing intriguing questions about the "being of the human" (Chidester 2018, 3), he does note that Bruno Latour's book, *The Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2010) provides a basis for further examination of ways in which the human is destabilised (Chidester 2019, 12). Latour also offers important avenues of enquiry for moving beyond the remit of modern secularism.

Latour's position in *Factish Gods* is radical. He argues that as humans construct their gods, so too the gods construct humans, in a complex interplay of matter and meaning. To make sense of this, he calls into question the Enlightenment ontology that separates subject from object, and human interiority from the matter of the external world. As an alternative, he argues for a relational world that is both fact and fabrication (Latour 2010, 19). He considers humans to

be contributing to the ever-developing ontological substance of the world, which is not limited to physical matter, but instead is formed through dynamic engagement with a world that is inherently non-Cartesian. This world is neither theological nor secular.

Latour argues that as long as the modern project continues to insist on secular ontological distinctions, there is no way to understand "how one passes from a human action that fabricates, to the autonomous entities that are welcomed by that action and revealed through it" (Latour 2010, 35). In Latour's view, the modern project, through cleaving to Cartesian distinctions, "drained space" and created "emptiness" (Latour 2010, 39). It then put the concept of belief to work bolstering "the notion of an interiority filled with hollow dreams, having no reference whatsoever to the reality known only to the exact or social sciences" (Latour 2010, 40). As such, the conceptual apparatus of belief creates a "crack that runs between epistemological questions and ontological questions" (Latour 2010, 45). The resulting 'real world' then consists of the interiority of the subject as ontologically distinct from the exteriority of the object. However, outside of the modern remit, "variable-geometry ontologies" force modern thinkers "to redefine not only action but also actors" (Latour 2010, 43). In this regard, Latour moves definitively past the exclusive humanism characteristic of the modern project, and provides the theoretical basis for moving beyond the bounds of modern secularism as well.

Although the meaningful and powerful ways that humans engage the material making of the world are not fully explicated in Chidester's material contribution, his expansion of materiality to include even non-physical phenomena in as much as they *matter*, goes some way towards transgressing the Cartesian dichotomy at the heart of the exclusive humanist programme. However, while Latour points to the ontological and epistemological impacts that secular reason has on the figuring of the world, Chidester does not read this into his dynamic material approach. Although Chidester's materiality expands past Cartesian limits to include the role of both physical objects and analytical categories in the making of religion, there is little consideration given to the ontological and epistemological impact of secular reason. This is evident in as much as he does not extend his current analysis to a material investigation of

the invisible agents that populate religious traditions[16]. Considering that his approach is able to generate material metrics for the analysis of theologically derived concepts, exploring the material aspects of nonhuman and invisible agents should provide no conceptual difficulties. However, the limits of the secular project, particularly in terms of the atheist commitments required for secular scholarship, limit this new and valuable critical approach. With secular limits in place, the domains once classified as 'supernatural' do not matter to the case at hand.

1.5. Secular Limits

I have argued that debates within the domain of critical material religious studies have approached the question of the religion from various angles, but remain within the purview of the secular mandate. In this regard, even new materialist discourse on religion does not stray beyond modern limits, and therefore remains entrenched in hegemonic logic. The ongoing agential cut at the limits of secular reason become visible in the *Material Religion* journal (2019: volume 15, issue 5), where leading critical scholars debate the limits of nonhuman agency within the materialist discourse on religion. The issue dealt with the debate between humanist (Meyer, Bräunlein) and new materialist (Braidotti, Bennett) approaches. While there are many points of contention between scholars representing these two positions, a tacit agreement around the secular nature of their discourse grounds the debate as a whole.

1.5.1. Material Debates

New materialist discourse is still shaped by secular commitments, resulting in versions of materiality that are ontologically and epistemologically limited to Eurocentric ways of working with the world.

> Materialism itself is an ontological thesis: everything which is, is based on "matter", whatever that means. But the argument here is ultimately epistemological, in that the ontological thesis appeals to the successes of science. It is because the paradigm examples of valid knowledge in the modern world (supposedly) take the realities they study as made exclusively

[16] That said, he did show in earlier work that these agents come to matter in a political sense.

> of matter, that we are supposed to conclude that everything is matter. (Taylor 2007, 574)

The limitations imposed on the new materialist approach to the study of religion continue to be problematic. A debate in the journal *Material Religion* (2019: volume 15, issue 5) reflects a conversation that took place in 2018, at the Ninth Annual "Conference on the New Materialisms" in Utrecht. The panel abstract asks "To what extent can the idea of God, gods, and spirits at all be materialized, without being destroyed?" This debate is important for the critical examination of secular limits, both within new materialist and post-human discourse.

Sonia Hazard frames the debate as centered around the question of "whether a new materialist approach can account for the power of the imagination, especially the imagination of the supernatural" (Hazard 2019, 630). The phrasing of her question is indicative of the modern, and secular, stance that Hazard is working from. The ascription of other-than- human agencies to 'imagination' presents a clear reduction of the practical realities of those who engage in reciprocal relations with invisible agents. Further, her use of the term 'supernatural' also reflects her secular positioning, and the Cartesian (and Christianised) split that this position entails. The question is phrased in modern, secular terms, and while it may be open to a range of critical responses, these are ultimately neutralised by the reduction to 'imagination', and limited by the fabrication of the supernatural as a distinct and separate domain.

In Hazard's work on the material study of religion, she notes the many ways that "material entities and forces exert power on humans" (Hazard 2019, 629), which in turn "make a priori separations between humans and nonhumans difficult to sustain" (Hazard 2019, 629). However, her new material conception of nonhuman agents pertains only to physical objects and processes. She discusses the social agency of "the coastal ocean" (Bolster 2012, 4), "cold weather" (Perry 2017), "animals" (Govindrajan 2018) and carving of "pipestone" (TallBear 2015, 234). While she asks what new materialism gives the academy, in terms of "what are we able to see and analyze that before we could not?" (Hazard 2019, 630), she does not venture into discussions of purportedly 'supernatural' agents.

Also in response to the debate, Birgit Meyer mentions the "rich archive of accounts about animated beings and nonhuman agency" (Meyer 2019, 620) that the field of religious studies

has collated. She notes that "it is high time to bring this archive into play", and, through transdisciplinary exchanges, to "open up towards recognitions of alternative forms of knowledge production, for instance from the Global South" (Meyer 2019, 620)[17]. This acknowledgement of the value of nonhuman agents is rare in the discourse on new materialism. Although acknowledging alternative forms of knowledge production is touted as necessary, the mattering of alternate knowledges is still precluded by secular limits. While scholars admit to the existence, and even the importance, of alternate world-making practices, the foundational stance within academic discourse on new materialism remains secularised, and therefore indicative of the hegemony of the global north. Within secular discourse, nature (and semiotic actants that engage natural processes) has become the only paradigm worth investigating, and the agencies ascribed to the supernatural have ceased to matter in any form worth noting.

This is evident in the response that Peter Bräunlein submits to the 2019 Conference debate. He notes that "the material turn in the study of religion overlaps with the ontological turn, which even leads to a nonhuman turn" (Bräunlein 2019, 622), but immediately problematises the notion of the agential nonhuman. Firstly, he notes the difficulty of engaging empirical research into this domain (Bräunlein 2019, 623). Secondly, in this debate he overlooks entirely the possibilities of investigating 'supernatural' other-than-human agents, and instead argues against the agency ascribed to physical objects in Jane Bennett's work.

Bräunlein argues that Bennett's "vibrancy terminology" (Bräunlein 2019, 623) is not applicable beyond the metaphoric application of this notion. To ground his argument, he asks "how can we measure the degree of vibrancy of a Polynesian mask or the relics of Catholic saints, and what do we gain thereby?" (Bräunlein 2019, 623). In doing so, he notes the methodological challenge that vibrant material agency presents to religious studies (Bräunlein 2019, 623). Bräunlein is adamant that the challenge of a "*non-anthropo-centric,*

[17] It is important to note how Meyer studies these nonhuman agents, specifically the role of the Holy Spirit amongst Pentecostals in Ghana. Her question is a humanistic one: how is the 'wow' experience bodily, ritually and sensorially generated by these adherents? How are these habituated historically, and what social-political roles do they play? As such, she engages her study of nonhuman agents using lenses from the modern secular academy.

constantly entangled perspective" (Bräunlein 2019, 623 italics in original) is insurmountable in the study of religion.

However, Bräunlein's criticism of vibrant agentic material betrays a lack of engagement with the new notions of agency that emerge in critical feminist posthuman discourse. Within Karen Barad's critical posthumanism, agency does not exist as an isolated empirical metric. Rather, it takes form in relation. As such, the *relational* qualities of Polynesian masks can be investigated, and through this, the vibrancy, or the dynamic agency, of these material objects could be quantified. This challenge could be well met through engaging Chidester's material approach, which is formulated around the notion of dynamic material. The Polynesian mask, as a vibrant material agent, could be examined in terms of the categories that make it distinct, the material formations of which it is part, and the material circulations it is engaged in. Through the application of a material method derived from Chidester's approach, the agency of material things becomes more tractable.

Chidester's reformulation of 'what matters' as the basis for material enquiry offers a solution to the quandary that Bräunlein faces. Stepping outside the Cartesian notion of matter, and allowing for the entangled relations that make up the mattering of the world, is a fundamental step towards the non-anthropocentric position that Bräunlein faces with such trepidation. Rather than decrying 'anthropos' entirely, the question of *how things come to matter* allows for the decentering of humans within the investigation of a dynamic material world.

That said, Chidester does not explicitly explore this posthuman application of materiality. He too remains sceptical of the vibrancy that Bennett ascribes to material things, and keeps his attention purely on the human agencies involved in the making of material religion. His approach nonetheless opens the possibility of empirically extending the realm of investigation past this solipsism, and towards the complex entanglement of material becoming.

When Bräunlein asks "by what criteria can *we* judge that the lives of people in a room are superior to that of the chairs"? (Bräunlein 2019, 623 italics in original), hoping to show the absurdity of ethical dilemmas within vitalist new materialist paradigms, he neglects the relational structures that maintain materiality. Perhaps he should be asking about the relations through which the chair comes to matter? What categories make it up, and what formations shape it? How does it circulate through the material dynamics of the world at

large, and how does this compare to the material formations and circulations that make up the people in Bräunlein's imaginary room? In this regard, the criteria for judging which agents take priority in say, the case of a fire, becomes clearer, despite the multitude of agents present.

The debates that took place in at the 2018 Material Religion Conference, and the written responses by Hazard, Meyer and Bräunlein, serve to delimit the current discourse on materiality, and by extension, the ongoing investigations into nonhuman agents within the study of religion. Of the three, only Birgit Meyer's response allows for the necessity of engaging collectives with different knowledge-making practices in place. She notes the possibilities within new materialist discourse for engaging empirically with "people, objects, and even gods" (Meyer 2019, 620). As such, she appears open to the notion that secular limits may need to be abandoned in the ongoing critique of "Eurocentric presumed universalisms" (Meyer 2019, 620). That said, while she points in the direction that scholarship might engage in furthering the critique of modern and exclusive humanism, the path towards a dissolution of secular values within the academy remains opaque.

The reticence with which material religion thinkers approach the breaking of secular boundaries arguably reflects a desire to avoid the ecclesiastical errors of earlier European thinkers. It's important to note that explicitly secular new materialism is specifically *anti-clerical* in nature (Kessler 2019, 62). In other words, for many scholars, the ongoing move towards new material theory is also a continued move away from the mores of Christian theology. In rejecting religion as a significant domain of enquiry, critical thinkers reject the hegemonic oversight of the Christian Church in human knowledge production. However, in rejecting the Imperialism of historical Christian Europe, these scholars also reject multiple non-Christian positions that fall under the vague category 'religious', and it's even more shadowy counterpart, 'the supernatural'. I have argued that these distinctions serve to maintain an ongoing race-based cut between the knowledges of indigenous and black collectives, and the Eurocentric model that modern secular discourse provides. To move definitively past modern Eurocentric hegemonies, it is not sufficient to be only non-theological. A reckoning with non-secular possibilities is also required. As long as critical discourse on religion is moulded by secular constraints, it fails to account for the motivations that hold secular boundaries in place.

1.5.2. Secular Racism

Liberal scholars have argued that secular values "are crucial to ensure freedom of religion and belief as well as limitations on religious coercion" (Sahgal 2012, 53). Secularism has been viewed as informing "anti-racist struggles" and as allowing for the development of "a sense of belonging on the basis of equality" (Sahgal 2012, 53). As with the other modern constructions discussed in this thesis, the term 'secular' has been applied in many different contexts, and is a cause for ongoing debate within the academy. Secular policies have been touted as defending people, (especially women), from "regressive religious culture", and policing the "extremism" of certain traditions. That said, other scholars have argued against this position, pointing to the way in which this secular rationale has often acted as a "smokescreen" in wars waged against peoples of the global south, and provided a means to extend control over peoples who do not subscribe to the western mandate. (Blencowe 2021, 395).

I will be focusing on these critical voices, as I intend to draw attention to the racial limits imposed by secular reasoning within the study of religion. Much has been written about the benefits of the secular ideal, but little has been written about the ontological and epistemological hegemonies that secular reason imposes on the religious studies academy, or the racist nature of these impositions. Leila Benhadjoudja proposes the term "racial secularism" to focus attention on the "politics of race and coloniality" that are entangled with the development of the secular domain (Benhadjoudja 2022, 184). It has also been argued that secularism remains the focus of western elites, "who work out of the same centers of power that earlier spread their 'civilization'" to the global south (Anidjar 2006, 64).

Coloniality has been central in the formation of the modern project, and secularism has also been an intrinsic part of this project. It therefore behoves scholars to examine "the colonial charge of secularism" (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 367) from a position that questions the purported neutrality of this position. Considering that secularism is firmly entangled with the history of European Christianity (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 361), questions remain concerning the role of secular discourse in "maintaining and renewing" imperial structures and even white supremacism in today's world (Benhadjoudja 2022, 185). Critical anthropologist Saba Mahmood also notes how secularism "is itself a historical product with specific epistemological, political, and moral entailments" (Mahmood 2017, 198), and Amer Meziane

suggests that current secular policies are deeply entrenched in the "process of imperialization of the West" (Amer Meziane 2021, 14). The secular mandate underlies the modern "coloniality of knowledge" (Blencowe 2021, 389), and as such this position cannot be accepted as the final ground for an inclusive study of religion.

While secularism has been figured as a signifier of western progress and "political maturity" (Blencowe 2021, 394), it has also functioned as a way to maintain a hierarchy when considering human development (Asad 1993; Chakrabarty 2000; Blencowe 2021). In this way, the secular ideal has disenfranchised indigenous populations whose way of life has been judged as ignorant and superstitious (Chakrabarty 2000; Stengers 2002; Blencowe 2021). This racialised metric has marked black bodies as evolutionarily deficient, and therefore worthy of exploitation (Blencowe 2021, 395).

That said, much of the discourse that leads to a *postsecular* position also bears the marks of Christian hegemony. Many proponents of the postsecular turn call for a return to Christian religious values, which themselves are implicated in western imperialism (Cooper 2013). In as much as the postsecular overlaps with "the 'return' of religion" (Mufti 2013, 08), it continues to exemplify the modern dichotomy, pitting Eurocentric religious practices against Eurocentric secular policy. This reinforces "secular-religious antagonisms" in postcolonial spaces (Mufti 2013, 19), thereby ensuring the continued erasure of indigenous voices.

Critical scholars have laboured to produce a non-theological approach to the study of religion. It is my understanding that a non-secular position is also needed. As neither religious nor secular, this position remains to be established.

1.6. Conclusion

As a researcher I locate my intellectual formation within the northern canon, and I am drawn to look beyond the borders that this canon constructs. Before borders can be transgressed, they first need to be located. Within the spaces where I am uncovering limits, the borders become immediately visible. In this chapter I have presented secular scholarship as a colonial and racial limit in the study of religion. This limit forms a border between the global north and the global south.

My focus has specifically been on the development of religious studies as an academic discipline. This discipline struggles with cohering a stable identity outside of the theological

study of religion. While many early scholars tried to devise a science of religion, they were limited by the Protestant Christian frameworks that gave an implicit structure to their scientific discourse. These frameworks also provided ground for race-based distinctions, which in turn supported colonial violence. While these frameworks have largely been abandoned, I will argue that secular and atheist commitments still rely on the Christocentric ontology which dominates global academic discourse.

Early accounts of religion within the academy acknowledged the role of invisible and nonhuman agents, but this proved problematic. Through attention paid to the purported entities that formed the focus of religious practices, various approaches to the non-theological and scientific study of religion granted a certain efficacy to these theologically derived agential categories. However, critiques launched by McCutcheon, Fitzgerald and others paint religious studies scholars as implicitly theological if they grant any import to theological categories at all. I have argued that this outright rejection of theology consists of a specific rejection of Protestant ontologies and epistemologies, and does not offer a coherent account of the other religious categories that are reduced by the secular approach.

Along with the word 'religion', multiple other categories also dissolve without remainder. These categories are the ones that are fundamental to people who work within indigenous religious traditions, and often refer to a class of relations that cohere around other-than-human agentic dynamics. The deities, spirits and ancestors that abound in global narratives are not accounted for within the purview of the critical theory of religion. Even Chidester, who breaks the ontological envelop of Cartesian materiality by admitting categories like the 'sacred' as material phenomena, does not attempt a material analysis of invisible and nonhuman agents in his most recent contribution to the discourse. These aspects of human practice are not granted the necessary salience in the developing domain of material religious studies.

Can a stable religious studies discipline cohere without any discussion of these agents? While earlier religious studies attempts were criticized for allowing theological categories to matter as if they were *sui-generis* and essential in a scientific sense, Chidester's approach can allow for anything that matters to the case at hand. Why are the purported agents of religion not addressed in Chidester's overview of dynamic material religion?

The legacy of secular humanism makes it particularly difficult for religious studies as a critical academic venture to form a coherent account of nonhuman agents, even with novel methodological means to do so. While the exclusivity of the human is transgressed in current material religion discourse, the secular ground of the human is accepted as a given.

The field that identifies as the non-theological study of religion carries a heavy burden. As Whittaker notes, “far from being innocuous, … the academic study of religion is full of critical implications. In this sense it is not neutral and never will be” (Whittaker 2013, 67). As Charles Taylor, Talal Asad and Bruno Latour have argued, the domain of secular reason is not a neutral space of enquiry, but instead is constructed to bolster the modern project. Chidester’s move towards posthuman theory offers a new domain for the non-theological material study of religion to explore, but does not yet move beyond the limits of secular enquiry. That said, a closer look at developments in posthuman discourse may shed light on the direction in which critical material studies is heading. It will may help to elucidate how and why moving beyond the exclusivity of the human does not necessarily involve moving beyond the bounds of the secular, despite the deep entanglement of these two categories.

In the following chapter I will explore the contributions of a few key scholars within the posthuman domain. These scholars, also from the northern canon, present conceptual apparatus that resonate with the direction in which Chidester is moving, and could help consolidate the move beyond exclusive humanist limits in the non-theological study of religion. That said, the limits of posthuman discourse are also evident when considering the secular hegemony in posthuman scholarship. It is my hope that by exploring the secular limits of current posthuman discourse, the ongoing secular limits within the critical theory of religion can be further explicated.

CHAPTER 2: POSTHUMAN MATERIAL

Whether we appreciate the term or not, these are posthuman times.

- Rosi Braidotti

2.1. Introduction

One of the strongest criticisms of the posthuman movement is that it comprises voices from the global north, while ignoring the ontologies and epistemologies of the global south. Situated as I am within the northern canon, posthuman discourse is easily accessible to me, and resonates with the work I am doing. However, the myopic nature of the discourse is glaringly obvious at the points where supposedly new or 'posthuman' insights bear striking resemblances to existing positions. As a citizen of a country in the global south, it is not possible to read critical posthuman texts without noting the similarities that exist between posthuman philosophy and the indigenous philosophies that surround me. In this regard, the posthuman discourse that I will be discussing in this chapter is as limited as the critical theory of religion discourse discussed in the previous chapter.

In chapter one, I discussed the development of religious studies as an academic discipline. The attempt at devising a non-theological approach to the study of religion was met with multiple challenges. The primary difficulty was in constructing an object of religion that did not rely on a theologically derived ontology. By the end of the 20th century, key critical scholars argued that the category of *religion* was a Eurocentric and Christocentric construction. As a result, some scholars argued for the disbanding of religious studies departments within the modern research university. Alongside the critical religion scholars who argued to abandon the academic construct of religion entirely, critical theory of religion scholars continued to work on ways in which the secular academy could approach religion as a modern construct without resorting to theological reasoning. These critical thinkers found a home in the new on materialism that began to take on interdisciplinary significance as the millennium drew to a close. Offering a coherent material approach to the non-theological object of religion, as well as novel lenses for the development of new methods, David Chidester is a key thinker within this cohort. Chidester's work destabilises the material limits

that Enlightenment thinkers had bequeathed to secular scholarship, and points towards a disruption of the exclusive humanism which underlies the modern project. However, his approaches to the study of religion does not account for the invisible agents that are implicated in religious practices. Within critical theory of religion, secular limits retain a close hold the construction of agents, even within the purview of the new materialism, where agency is extended into the material realm. To address this aporia, I argued that secular conceptions of agency, and the exclusivity of the human agent, requires further attention.

In this chapter I will discuss the limits of both exclusive humanism and secular reason, by using Boaventura de Sousa Santos' theory of the *abyssal line*. De Sousa Santos provides language for discussing racialised exclusions in exclusive humanism and in secular rhetoric. By engaging de Sousa Santos' theory of the abyssal line, I will demonstrate how secular humanist reasoning erases the values and distinctions found within non-European and non-Christian spaces. The abyssal line enacts ontological and epistemological closures which correspond with the ongoing hegemony of the global north in contemporary discourse.

There are already developments within academia that begin to undo the effects of the abyssal line. In some key regards, the multi-disciplinary turn to the posthuman constitutes an important disruption of abyssal distinctions. David Chidester's material approach points in a posthuman direction, and as such he is already engaged in the disruption of human exclusivity in the study of religion. A closer look at posthuman theory will help to illuminate this necessary disruption. In what follows I will provide an overview of some of the conceptual tools supplied by critical posthuman theorists, in an attempt to further develop coherent knowledge practices within the field of religious studies, and as a response to a history of hegemonic humanist reasoning. As a form of enquiry, the posthuman engagement with the world is informed by many different and pertinent models and discourses. The continual disruption of the exclusive humanist subject, beginning with the postmodern turn and refined through feminist, postcolonial and new materialist praxis, is a core focus in critical posthumanism.

However, I will also argue that critical posthumanism quickly reaches a limit in what it can offer the study of religion. Posthuman scholars fail to take into account the limits of secular scholarship. I will discuss how secular discourse during the colonial era was responsible for race-based exclusions, which are still visible within the domain of posthumanism as a secular

domain of enquiry. To further explicate this, I turn to the work of Axelle Karera, who problematises the continued presence of racial divides within the new materialist and posthuman programme.

Although posthuman thinkers consider themselves to be postmodern, their interventions take place within an unexamined secular framework. This discourse is therefore limited by modern ontological and epistemological boundaries. That said, critical posthumanism still offers novel and important tools for thinking beyond the exclusivity of *res cogitans*, and the exclusive human that constitutes it. In this regard, it provides conceptual apparatus for following Chidester's gesture towards the disruption of the 'being of the human' within the critical study of religion.

When considering the ways in which exclusive humanism has shaped the modern project, it becomes apparent that there are alternative constructions of 'the human' which have developed outside of modernity's jurisdiction. Following Bruno Latour's theory of the nonmodern, I will discuss this heuristic category with a closer look at indigenous world-making practices, and the ways in which indigenous collectives engage forms of being human that are not limited by modern exclusivity and secular hegemony. As such, the nonmodern offers an important site of enquiry for critical scholars of religion. The value of the ontologies and epistemologies that inform nonmodern practices remain relatively opaque to the scholarly gaze, which is currently limited by abyssal secular reason.

2.2. Human Matters

Jacques Waardenburg, in his book *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (2011) notes that a "certain humanism" combined with a "more or less critical scholarship" (Waardenburg 2011, xii) is the norm in late 20th and early 21st century religious studies scholarship. Inherited and unexamined forms of secular humanism are shared amongst critical religion scholars and critical theory of religion scholars. The formation of the secular human may also be the proverbial elephant in the room. Charles Taylor discusses exclusive humanism, which is the hallmark of the modern secular endeavour, as the form of humanism that assumes human minds are the only salient agents within the world at large. This assumption denotes the limits of secular reason. With regard to the materialist writings of key religious studies scholars like Birgit Meyer, Sonia Hazard, Peter Bräunlein and David Chidester, agency might extend past exclusive humanist limits, but this agency is still hemmed in by secular concerns. The result is

a critical theory of religion that does not address the continued relevance of invisible agents within human material dynamics. As such, the critical material approach to the study of religion continues to disenfranchise peoples from previously colonised collectives, and indigenous peoples who work directly with nonhuman agents in their making of the world.

If modernity is defined in terms of secular humanism, does this mean that critical theory of religion, by committing to a secular frame, remains an essentially modern venture? And if so, could this be problematic? With material theory now "located at the heart of religious studies" (Meyer et al. 2010, 210), this question becomes highly pertinent. The ongoing focus on the human (as opposed to the theological focus on the divine) has allowed legitimacy to the academic study of religion, despite the controversy around the term religion itself (Arnal & Braun 2014; Plate 2015, 03) . The secular study of the human begins by rejecting claims to fuzzy theological categories like 'divinity'. Reducing the study of religion to a study of the human allows for the scientific lens to cohere, and also commits the religious studies enterprise to a humanist framework. Religion, if it exists at all, becomes tractable[18] in the scientific study of human behaviour. That said, the narrative that places human beings as the exclusive agent within a world of inert material has been countered from multiple directions in recent times. Both critical material theory of religion and critical posthumanism work towards this end. To understand the importance of disrupting this exclusive and exclusionary version of the human, the history of the term needs further examination.

2.2.1. The Historical Human

When trying to shine a spotlight on humanism as a category, what becomes clear is that this is both a vague and a loaded term. Didier Fassin points out that "antagonistic reactions to humanism will be quite different depending on which version they mainly oppose" (Fassin 2019, 34). Critics have argued that even the most neutral expressions of the term "humanist" carries with it ideological implications of one sort or another.

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[18] The term 'tractable', from the Latin *tractare* 'to handle', designates an object that is available to hand, that can be grasped and manipulated by human means. The tractability of an object is ultimately what draws the limits around the practice of science. If it can't be grasped and measured in some capacity, it is not available to scientific enquiry.

Modern usages of the term humanism can be tracked back to the European Renaissance, and reaches its characteristic form during the European Enlightenment. Christian *humanitas* scholars began reading ancient texts[19] in order to restructure society after the tumultuous Middle Ages on the European continent. At this point in history, Christian monasteries were the centres of knowledge production and scholarship in Europe (Mann 2004, 02). By the mid-Renaissance period, schools outside of monasteries were being established to teach clergymen. The growth in literacy amongst clergymen during this time fuelled a wider cultural shift outside of the monastic frame that saw lay Christian scholars enamoured with the classical texts of ancient times.

This Renaissance form of humanism was in many ways rejected by key thinkers in the 16th century, as they began the project of centralising the human within the study of the *natural world*. Following the Protestant Reformation in Europe, Enlightenment thinkers turned to ongoing developments in the natural sciences to guide their thinking. Earlier humanisms were accused of looking longingly at the past, while ignoring the significant developments of the present time. With advances in technology and sea travel, Europe was beginning to develop in new directions, and a romantic attachment to ancient civilizations seemed inimical to progress. In addition to this, Enlightenment thinkers were moving away from the theologically constructed God as central to enquiry, and foregrounding the power of human reason instead. As discussed in Chapter One, the Enlightenment period provided ground for the emergence of an exclusive version of humanism, in which the human was the only active

[19] These ancient intellectual legacies were preserved, translated and contributed to by Arab-Islamic thinkers while the European continent went though its dark ages, before being transmitted to 15th century Renaissance Europe. Muslim and Arab thinkers shaped a number of intellectual advances and innovations in multiple areas, including mathematics, chemistry, medicine, and philosophy, which they passed to European thinkers at that time. As the 2nd millennium progressed, the Muslim influence both in relation to intellectual innovations as well as engagement, preservation and transmission of older European legacies was rendered peripheral. Through a colonial politics of knowledge, Europeans instead attributed their intellectual lineage to European classical texts themselves, written as they were by the continents' 'ancestors', and therefore claimed as direct lineage in the making of the Renaissance European identity.

agent within the natural world of physical objects and 'soulless' animals. This was also a race-based construction of the human, developing during Europe's colonial era.

Zikiyyah Jackson notes that "racial blackness came to represent the paradigmatic figure of the nonhuman" (Jackson 2015, 216). This violent exclusion is not accounted for within posthuman discussions. In moving beyond the exclusive humanism of the western imperial project, these historical injustices need addressing. Without an explicit accounting for race-based agential cuts, the "discursive proliferation" of new materialist and posthuman ideals serve "to conceal systems of racial oppression" (Karera 2019, 39). To remedy this, focus must move to the onto-epistemologies that are still excluded from mattering within the posthuman domain.

Charles Taylor describes how the exclusive humanist ideal is produced in opposition to "porous" forms of relationality (Taylor 2007, 27), and is achieved by engaging a "buffered" position in the world by withdrawing from "certain modes of intimacy" (Taylor 2007, 137). This process of buffering constructs an autonomous self for the individual, and results in a "sense of self-possession, of a secure inner mental realm" (Taylor 2007, 301). The exclusive human exists within a world in which the inner mental realm is sufficiently buffered that most 'external' relations have ceased to matter. This form of the human relies in Descartes distinction between the divine rationality of the human mind, and the profane physicality of the external world. From this distinction the philosophical ground of modern secularism took shape. Based on the division of the world into mind and matter, secular thinkers inherited the Christocentric cosmology that made sense of Descartes' prejudice and adopted Cartesian convictions about the supremacy of human reason.

Talal Asad argues that this secular version of the exclusive humanism produces the modern world, which itself is "a *project*— or rather, a series of interlinked projects—that certain people in power seek to achieve" (Asad 2003, 13). He also notes that secular modes of world-making form their own "epistemic category" (Asad 2003, 01), and are therefore not neutral, but political.

> Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and

> differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion. (Asad 2003, 05)

As Nigerian scholar Adeshina Afolayan argues, the emergence of exclusive humanism, coupled with secular modern progress narratives, took place within the violent upheavals of European colonialism (Afolayan 2021, 09). As such, exclusive humanism denotes a form of epistemicide, resulting in the production of Europe "as the true *knower*, and of *knowledge* as only possible in the singular" (Afolayan 2021, 09 italics in original). Afolayan's discussion of "epistemic vices" (Afolayan 2023, 226) is pertinent. He defines epistemic vices as constructs that "obstruct the gaining, keeping, and sharing of knowledge" (Afolayan 2023, 226). The secular form of humanism that grounds the modern project, and that still prevails in the current religious studies academy, presents as an epistemic vice that needs addressing.

Few religious studies scholars have turned their reflexive gaze to the secular ontologies and epistemologies that grant them access to academic discourse. Even the critical scholars that are currently deconstructing the limits of matter and human agency are not yet questioning the secular limits at the heart of the exclusive humanist enterprise. The secular framework in religious studies borrows its legitimacy first from its identity as 'not theology', and then from its engagement with scientific discourse. But to be secular is not necessarily to be scientific. Secular thinking involves a set of ideological commitments, with important ontological and epistemological consequences. Science may follow from these commitments, but it also predates them on the historical stage. Science both precedes and exceeds exclusive humanism. The task remains to "correct the global cognitive injustice imposed by Eurocentrism" (Afolayan 2021, 09), and disrupt the notion that non-European ways of knowing are "ontologically inferior and epistemically deficient" (Afolayan 2023, 226) to those produced by modern secular reason. This onto-epistemic hegemony continues to underly exclusions and absences within global discourse.

2.2.2. The Material Human

As the pivot around which modern practice revolves, the modern exclusive version of the human is a material formation that bears closer examination. Formations are recognisable through the boundary conditions they engage, they "exercise forces, compelling and repelling forces, centripetal and centrifugal forces, that draw people inside and push people outside"

(Chidester 2018, 75). What is excluded and what is repelled in the formation of the secular human? Tracking the discourse back to Descartes, the initial exclusion happens between the human mind as divine and eternal, and the rest of the material world as limited and contingent. The human is defined in modern discourse according to the separation of the rational self from the contingent materiality in which this self is ensconced. It goes without saying that this Christian version of the human rejects the multitude of possibilities inherent in indigenous, pagan and pre-Christian ontologies.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that Descartes' version of the human being combines "extreme theism" with a "practical atheism" (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 35). European rational enquiry is exempted from "returning to God" (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 35), and in some fundamental ways, the modern exclusive humanist arrives at the point where the human mind itself becomes God (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 443). This grounds the exclusive humanist narrative in a context that allows only for the description and analysis of human agency, which is considered to be unique in all the world, and deserving of ongoing special attention. The secular dynamics of the buffered human within the material becomings of the world form the crux of research and academic enquiry in the modern world. This leaves many questions unanswered, and unanswerable.

How does critical theory of religion account for humans who form relations beyond buffered modern limits? How to account for shamans who "cross ontological boundaries deliberately and adopt the perspective of nonhuman subjectivities" (Castro 2004, 468), for indigenous collectives who express "convivial closeness" with spirit beings through the material "sharing of resources" (Rosengren 2006, 807), and for collectives that engage a non-anthropocentric concern for "the interests of all things comprising the whole, not just humans" (Gellers 2021, 53)? Can these aspects of global world-making be accounted for with the tools of current critical theory? And does critical posthuman discourse have anything to offer this challenging question within the field of religious studies? I will argue that an accounting for indigenous world-making practices cannot take place as long as the enquiry is conditioned by secular understandings of the world.

Within the critical study of religion, the human is a material formation, and denotes "a complex assembly of meaning and power" (Chidester 2018, 75). Relations that take place within the buffered limits of secular humanist ontology are foregrounded, while other

relations are eclipsed and erased. Can critical scholars of religion defend drawing the boundaries of their enquiries at limits inscribed by the secular position, which itself bears the marks of Protestant Christianity and European hegemony? What are the implications and material culpabilities of this material formation as it circulates around the globe?

As per Chidester, material circulations are to be found in the movement of material formations through space and time. The circulation of the exclusive humanist formation, which carries traces of Protestant theology and relies on a Cartesian distinction between humans and the rest of the world, has had far-reaching consequences. The formation of the secular, exported to African shores, re-formed the peoples of that continent in the shadow of the European rational and buffered self. In these encounters, the development and circulation of the term 'human' continued to serve the aims of European imperialism. Foucault argued that humanism is "the most burdensome legacy stemming from the nineteenth century" (Foucault 2001, 544). This legacy was imposed upon various world collectives as Europe expanded through colonial conquests. The opinion that, to be human, one must also be "rational and autonomous" (Fassin 2019, 33), went hand-in-hand with the hegemonic secular values of the European Enlightenment. As these values circulated into non-European spaces, the "moral and political universalism" (Fassin 2019, 33) that accompanied secular humanism provided foundation for colonial and imperial oppression.

In this regard, Africa was particularly disenfranchised. Nigerian poet Harry Garuba (1958 – 2020) notes the "almost total refusal to countenance unlocalized, unembodied, unphysicalized gods and spirits" (Garuba 2003, 267) by colonists encountering the indigenous African population. Reciprocal engagements with ancestors and spirit beings creates a "form of collective subjectivity that structures being and consciousness" (Garuba 2003, 269) within these collectives. As such, the agency of these other-than-human actants requires accounting for. This is not possible within the exclusive humanist mandate, which relegates agency to within the bounds of the rational and the human. While new materialist thinkers in the study of religion are prepared to extend limited forms of agency to the physical objects of the world, their ontologies don't extend to an analysis of the invisible agents which populate indigenous knowledge-making practice. As will be discussed further in this chapter, critical posthuman scholars, who focus directly on deconstructing the exclusive human, also fail to enquire into the limits of the secular mandate.

Rather than engaging with the complex ontologies and epistemologies of African collectives during colonial excursions, colonial Europeans instead drew an definitive line between the 'rational' agents of modernity, and the 'irrational' practices of people who engaged with invisible agents. The impact of exclusive humanism, as an epistemic vice, has been paramount in the shaping of relations between Europe and Africa, both during the centuries of colonial expansion, and within the decades of postcolonial development. The "models of the production of meaning" (Quijano 2000, 540) within African collectives were denigrated and erased in the process of establishing Eurocentric limits to agency within colonised spaces, and have yet to recover from this violent exclusion.

Adeshina Afolayan points to the "processes of imperial power, conquest and empire" (Afolayan 2009, 20) that shaped the 2nd millennium, and insists that *all* humanisms have been imperial. Talal Asad also questions whether "universal humanism" (Asad 2003, 21) is politically neutral as critical theorists claim, or if it points to an epistemic bias in the modern system of knowledge generation. He argues that the human at the centre of the critical project may be a highly problematic construct, and critiques the "idea of moral progress defined and directed by autonomous human agency" (Asad 2003, 24). By introducing "a particular concept of being human" to indigenous populations, European colonists reduced "qualitatively different kinds of behavior to a single standard" (Asad 2003, 112), which revolved around modern notions of "individualism and detachment" (Asad 2003, 124). The exclusive humanism that circulated through indigenous and black populations during this time disenfranchised these collectives while also defining them according to European criteria in developing global discourse.

What this means for the study of religion is that critical scholars need to engage an ongoing analysis of the closures that characterise the exclusive and secular humanist position. Walter Capps, author of *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (1995) concludes his book with a call to interrogate the limits of the existing conceptual frameworks in the study of religion. He urges future scholars to "circumscribe the range of access that the present map made possible" and "identify questions, problems, and possibilities that lie around the edges" (Capps 1995, 341). He also points to the need for "identifying proto-extra-paradigmatic areas" (Capps 1995, 341) outside of the normal purview, in order to distance the field from dependence on the "approach to human knowledge that was constructed and fashioned at

the time of the Enlightenment" (Capps 1995, 345). Finally, he hopes for future scholars to "discover analytical and interpretive methods that carry the promise of perpetually transforming the instruments and canons of intelligibility" (Capps 1995, 346). It is my understanding that in order for this to be possible, critical scholars need to continue with the project of deconstructing the exclusive humanist closures that were inherited as part of the early non-theological mandate in the study of religion, a project to which this thesis seeks to contribute.

2.2.3. The Abyssal Human

In his book *The End of the Cognitive Empire, the Coming of Age of the Epistemologies of the South* (2018) Boaventura de Sousa Santos provides a compelling discussion of what he calls 'the abyssal line', and the particular ontological and epistemological exclusions that continue to be enacted at its limits. To properly introduce this conceptual apparatus, Santos writes the following,

> Modern Western thinking is an abyssal thinking. It consists of a system of visible and invisible distinctions, the invisible ones being the foundation of the visible ones. The invisible distinctions are established through radical lines that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of "this side of the line" and the realm of "the other side of the line". The division is such that "the other side of the line" vanishes as reality, becomes nonexistent, and is indeed produced as nonexistent. (de Sousa Santos 2007, 01)

The abyssal domain is made up of "discarded experiences, made invisible both as agencies and as agents" (de Sousa Santos 2007, 05), and is historically tethered to regions of the world that Europe colonised. The "suppressed, silenced, and marginalized knowledges" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 08) which lie on the abyssal side of the line constitute a wealth of generative information for critical religion scholars. In today's world, the abyssal suppression of knowledges no longer occurs only in a fixed territorial location, but is active around the globe. The current form of the abyssal side of the line represents "an epistemological, nongeographical South, composed of many epistemological souths having in common the fact that they are all knowledges born in struggles…" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 01). De Sousa Santos argues that the existence of this line has not been sufficiently acknowledged by

modern science, and the awareness of this line is missing in the modern critical theories (de Sousa Santos 2007, 19). In the critical study of religion, as well as critical posthumanism, there is a telling occlusion of abyssal knowledges.

> As the abyssal line traverses and constitutes Eurocentric modern thought, all modern disciplines are racialized: they were established on this side of the abyssal line as if the existence of the other side of the line were of no account or had no influence on them. (de Sousa Santos 2018, 191)

De Sousa Santos draws attention to the "massive epistemicide" that "has been under way for the past five centuries" (de Sousa Santos 2007, 37). As a result of this epistemicide, 'abyssal knowledges' take form, comprising any epistemological position that has been violently countered by modern prerogatives. In the past, the world-making practices considered to be "popular, lay, plebeian, peasant, or indigenous" (de Sousa Santos 2007, 04) were viewed through a Eurocentric Cartesian lens, and reduced to "beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings" while also becoming "objects or raw materials for scientific inquiry" (de Sousa Santos 2007, 04). As discussed in Chapter One, the critical approach to the study of religion discarded the 'religion-as-belief' paradigm, preferring instead to focus on the material metrics of religion. In doing so, the purported agencies that are implicated in religious practices were erased from the realm of enquiry. Bräunlein argues that the notion of belief and private interiority lies at the "core of secularism" (Bräunlein 2016, 08). As objects of 'belief', and therefore not rising to the level of materiality, the nonhuman agents that make up the categories of spirits, gods, ghosts and ancestors continue to be rendered invisible.

De Sousa Santos notes that the "endogenous knowledge"[20] generated within African societies is not successfully disseminated, and does not gain relevance "beyond the contexts in which it emerges" (de Santos 2018, 112). He attributes this to the ongoing production of the abyssal line, which follows policies of racial exclusion inherited from centuries of European colonialism. Achille Mbembe's discussion of the *postcolony* also speaks to the unexamined construction of the abyssal line. Mbembe ties together modes of knowledge-making with the exercising of political power (Mbembe 1992, 05). The onto-epistemological tenets imposed

[20] The term endogenous refers to characteristics or processes that originate within a particular system.

by European colonisation continue to dominate postcolonial spaces, and are not open to challenge or negotiation (Mbembe 1992, 04). As de Sousa Santos notes, "the persistent dehumanization of vast portions of the population" corresponds with the "persistence of abyssal political thinking" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 112) and remains as a limit to be overcome.

The "perverted logic" of colonialism "distorts, disfigures, and destroys" the history of the people which it oppresses (Fanon 1968, 210). In particular, the spiritual or religious practices that flourish on the abyssal side of the line are denied a place in global world-making strategies, an exclusion which is "legitimized by the supposed superiority of the white race" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 111) and the hegemonic overvaluing of western culture.

This abyssal line is maintained through onto-epistemological commitments to secular humanist reasoning. For critical religion scholars, the task remains to remedy these historical exclusions. Critical theory of religion has done little to integrate African indigenous worldviews, in which "the sacred and profane, mind and body, the natural and the supernatural" are perceived as "organic dynamic entities, able to manifest themselves in all sorts of combinations" (Welsh-Asante 1993, 17). Francis Nyamnjoh notes that the explicit goal of European colonisation involved forcing colonised people "to abandon their universe of interconnections, interdependencies, mobilities and flexible and fluid identities" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 33). In the process of secular development, which in many ways coincided with Europe's colonial programme, these so-called 'nonrational' aspects of human experience were recast as "trivial and unworthy of attention" (Rosenau 1992, 10). Europe's epistemological dominance through colonialism aimed to shift the religious and cultural perceptions of the indigenous peoples they encountered.

Even in the 21st century, the "narrow and hegemonic" values of 19th century Europe continue to inform the abyssal line, which separates "the purportedly civilised West and the emerging rest" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 36). This cultural vice grip on what constitutes reality, and what is allowed to matter, reflects an onto-epistemological order that continues to usurp and erase indigenous, pagan and black world-making practices.

> The world is perceived and presented as dichotomous: there is the real and the unreal. The real is the rational, the natural, the physical and the scientific;

> the unreal is the irrational, the supernatural, the religious, the metaphysical and the subjective. (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 37)

This form of dualistic thinking relegates alternate onto-epistemologies to the abyss, where world-making strategies that are considered to be non-scientific, or 'primitive' are erased from global mattering. In so doing, racist and imperialist strategies continue to characterise the global north wherever it encounters the global south (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 38). The academic commitment to secular reasoning continues to uphold the construction of this abyssal line. This results in an academy that does not take seriously the notion that the "visible and invisible" and the "real and unreal" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 39) do not exist as separate constructs, but rather emerge as agential cuts made through the becoming of the world. In this regard, both critical posthumanism and critical theory of religion have failed to move beyond the abyssal line, and the "insensitive position of power" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 53) that informs it.

2.3. Beyond Human Exclusivity

In some key regards, critical material theory of religion has already moved into posthuman territory. Physical objects are being granted agency by a large cohort of scholars, and within Chidester's novel contribution, materiality itself expands to include categories that originated within theological discourse. While critical religion scholars are not identifying directly as posthumanist thinkers, they are deeply committed to currents within new materialism that are shared by posthuman thinkers. In this regard, contemporary posthuman discourse might have value for the critical material study of religion.

The posthumanism that I refer to is not anti-humanism or transhumanism. Rather, it is 'post' the formation of the exclusive human that characterises the modern colonial era. Within critical posthuman discourse, humans still exist and still matter. Furthermore, human mattering is approached in affirmative and generative ways. Like critical theory of religion (CTR), critical posthumanism (CPH) is inspired by Foucault, enamoured with new materialisms, and critically engages the investigation of modern hegemonies.

2.3.1. Posthumanism

Posthumanism finds its roots in the postmodern project that gripped thinkers over the latter part of the 20th century. There are multiple lines of posthuman thinking that can be traced

over this period. Debates around anthropocentricism, anti-human positions, and the technological entanglements of transhumanism[21] all stem from dissatisfaction with the modern exclusive humanist worldview, and all require a radical rethinking of the term 'human' in the 21st century.

The anti-humanism of the early postmodern period attempted a total deconstruction of the position of the modern rational human. As a form of intellectual protest, this process of radical deconstruction eventually ceded to more generative processes, where the future of the human emerged as a domain of *affirmative possibility* (Braidotti 2013). In this regard, the 'post' in current posthuman discourse is an opening to further engagement with the idea of the human. This discourse also responds to the arrival of the term "Anthropocene" at the start of the 21st century, introduced by Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen[22] to describe the human impact on the current geological era (Braidotti 2017, 23). Imagining affirmative futures becomes pivotal to critical posthuman thinkers in the light of the ecological disasters that modern exclusive humanism has initiated.

The posthumanism that might be of most relevance to study of religion follows the critical feminist voices within posthuman discourse. Feminist posthumanism rejects the ideal of the human as rational, male and Eurocentric, and can be seen as "post-exclusivism" (Ferrando 2013, 29) and "post-exceptionalism" (Ferrando 2013, 50), particularly when it comes to defining and enacting the role of the human in the larger world.

One of the inspirations for critical posthuman feminist discourse can be traced to French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose call to "dethrone the concept of Man" (Foucault 1970, 352) formed a point of focus for thinking about the contingencies of the human in the historical context. Foucault provided a framework for discussing flows of power in the historical and political world. In particular, he identified ways in which dynamic power relations within socio-political domains can be both restrictive (*potestas*) and productive

[21] Transhumanism disrupts modern thinking in as much as it theorises the formation and extension of the human beyond the body, through myriad technological interventions.

[22] The scientific term "Anthropocene" was officially adopted in 2016 during the 35TH International Geological Congress held in Cape Town, South Africa.

(*potentia*). This allowed for closer examination of *differences* in power, and of the continued enactments necessary to manipulate these differences. Using this analytical lens, relationships are foregrounded. The Foucauldian conceptual apparatus of power describes a relational domain, and thereby explicates the relational world. One of the main features in critical feminist posthumanism is the role of relationality. Explored through the lived body, and claimed as a site of generative knowledge, the relational and embodied human is considered to be intimately connected to the world.

> The focus is on the force of relationality, which is not a way of denying antagonism, but rather a different method of reworking it, starting from the specificity of one's locations and the complex web of social relations that compose the self. (Braidotti 2017, 16)

Feminist thinkers combined Foucault's framework with emerging feminist discourse on embodied practice to form the foundation of the critical posthuman position. In addition to engaging with philosophical developments, the critical feminist posthumanists who I consider in this thesis also welcome and engage with scientific appraisals of the world. These thinkers work to integrate the more recent developments in the natural sciences into their critical projects. Key posthuman theorist Karen Barad started her career as a physicist, and critical feminist Donna Haraway (from the generation prior to Barad) received training in biology and sociology of science. Barad presents her critical posthuman approach as placing "the understandings that are generated [from natural and human sciences] in conversation with one another" (Barad 2007, 92–93). Rosi Braidotti suggests that "the current scientific revolution" led by "contemporary bio-genetic, environmental, neural and other sciences" offers "powerful alternatives" (Braidotti 2013, 54) to modern humanist worldviews.

Multiple new materialisms form the basis of critical posthuman discourse, prompting some to categorise the two streams of thought as indicative of the same general trend. Kessler (2019) argues that "at the core of the most influential posthumanist ontologies lies a commitment to new materialism" (Kessler 2019, 16) and Peter Bräunlein in his 2019 article on material religion notes that the new materialist turn to the nonhuman may successfully serve as a the "political program of the emancipatory project of Posthumanism" (Bräunlein 2019, 623). Cudworth and Hobden discuss how the terms 'posthumanist' and 'new materialist', "are often used interchangeably by many authors identifying with such positions,

and also by their critics" (Cudworth & Hobden 2015, 135). As such, along with a focus on developing scientific theory and examining power relations, a renewed interest in a post-Cartesian materiality also characterises critical posthumanism discourse.

In this regard, the critical theory of religion which locates itself around material dynamics is well placed to engage posthuman theory. There is an existing resonance between these two lines of enquiry, found through their shared Foucauldian heritage, and the growing commitment to new versions of dynamic materiality.

The posthuman thinking that draws my attention in the writing of this thesis is affirmative, generative, and resonates with ongoing scientific developments through novel investigations of materiality. In the following section I will discuss key conceptual apparatus and methodologies from critical posthumanism which might be usefully applied within the critical study of religion. Critical feminist posthuman discourse provides three methodological interventions that may be of value to the critical study of religion. These are the bringing together of ontology and epistemology to remedy the Cartesian cut, the reworking of objectivity to reflect relation rather than separation, and the ongoing consideration of *how things come to matter*. As makers of the discipline have done so many times before, I borrow from ongoing interdisciplinary developments to further the non-theological study of religion.

2.3.2. Situated Knowledge

Donna Haraway's theories around *situated knowledge* support the project of critically examining modern understandings. Haraway's contributions to feminist philosophy inspired many of the critical posthumanists whose work I engage in this thesis. She writes the following:

> I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god trick is forbidden. (Haraway 1988, 589)

Forbidding the claim to universal knowledge has important implications for the modern academy. The fear of an abject relativism, in which *nothing can possibly be known*, often helps

to shore up the cause of Enlightenment reason against the barrage it faces in postmodern theory. In response however, Haraway notes that "relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well" (Haraway 1988, 584). Her alternative to this blinding binary is "partial, locatable, critical knowledges" (Haraway 1988, 584), which are neither universal nor relativised. These partial knowledges make possible the "webs of connections" (Haraway 1988, 584) that free the scholar from the "search for the fetishized perfect subject" (Haraway 1988, 586). The lived body as a site of knowledge liberates the academic quest from the labour of constructing universals based on abstract reasoning.

From this position, knowledge is not separate from material being, and therefore *ontology is not separate from epistemology*. Posthuman philosopher Karen Barad works on this important synthesis. She writes that "knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of the world in its differential becoming" (Barad 2007, 89). The Cartesian split between mind and matter made necessary the split between 'being' and 'knowing'. This split is characteristic of the exclusive humanist position, and is one of the more recalcitrant limits faced by the secular academy.

As discussed earlier, when Descartes formulated his philosophy, he devised a way of working with the world in which the human mind (*res cogitans*) was deemed possible through God's gift of a divine spark. This divine gift to humanity created a hard distinction between the human mind and the rest of the world (*res extensa*). Human bodies, as part of *res extensa*, relied on the presence of *res cogitans*. While the mind was capable of knowing, the body merely took part in material being, along with the rest of the soulless material world. As such, Descartes worked to exclude the knowledge generated by his body, in favour of the knowledge generated by his mind. Through the human mind's purported link to the Christian God, it become the sole provider of epistemological insight (knowledge), and for this to be possible, the knowing that arose in the body had to be expunged. The ability to separate the body from the mind became the basis for notions of epistemological objectivity. Knowing became a process that happened without the subjective input of the body, from the detached gods-eye position maintained by *res cogitans*.

As Barad notes, the philosophical turn to the "conscious self-aware self-contained independent rational agent" (Barad 2018, 341) was the outcome of this Cartesian split. Rational subjectivity was definitively separated from inert physicality. Rational knowing was the only way to generate knowledge about ontological being. Barad's critical posthuman position works to remedy this dichotomy. She argues that "We are part of the world in its differential becoming" (Barad 2018, 238), continuing with the explication of situated knowledge introduced by Haraway.

> The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. Onto-epistemology – the study of practices of knowing in being – is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter. (Barad 2018, 238)

The bringing together of ontology and the epistemology into onto-epistemology has important implications for ongoing theoretical and methodological development in the modern research university. If the domain of being is not intrinsically separate from the domain of knowing, this has direct consequences for the conceptual and practical academic landscape. Knowing-in-being is material and relational. Barad's introduction of the term onto-epistemology as a new conceptual reworking of the old modern dichotomy provides valuable scaffolding for the continued development of posthuman theory. Dynamic relational material becomes the ground for the postmodern and posthuman generation of knowledge. The Cartesian individual, who only through reason is able to engage the profound *otherness* of the external world, is transformed into a being that is both *self and world* through a network of relations.

The critical theory of religion scholars whose work I discussed in the previous chapter already engage with notions of the entanglement between humans and the world of objects. Their willingness to work with new materialist ontologies bring them in line with the theories being generated within critical posthumanism. Considering this, why does the material dynamic approach to the study of religion not simply expand to include an assessment of gods and spirits as emergent categories of knowing-in-being? Material relations with other-than-human agents could be analysed through the conceptual apparatus provided by onto-

epistemology, and the formations and circulations of these agents could be tracked, mapped, and better understood. However, if critical religion scholars were to begin the material analysis of invisible agents, the material approach to religion be moving beyond the bounds of secular discourse. This might open them to accusation of theological reasoning, and thereby disbar them from continued engagement with the rest of the secular academy.

Critical theorists of religion are not yet willing to disrupt the atheist commitments that underly secular discourse. As such, although critical theory of religion engages with novel views of materiality and in many ways disrupts the exclusive humanist position, it still holds firm to its identity as a secular endeavor. The commitment to the limits of secular reason continue to furnish critical theorists of religion with legitimacy within the broader academy, and when meeting the critical gaze of theorists like McCutcheon, Fitzgerald and Wiebe. To help remedy this stand-off, a posthuman grappling with the notion of *objectivity* may be needed. In some important ways, the quest for an objective and neutral stance from which to generate 'true' knowledge is the main driver of secular enquiry. That said, modern notions of objectivity have also been accused of supporting the hegemonic hold of Eurocentric knowledge making practices. Critical posthuman discourse both acknowledges and responds to the limits of modern objectivity in ways that critical religious studies could benefit from.

2.3.3. Objectivity and Mattering

Karen Barad argues that the many ways in which humans impact the ongoing enactment of the world need to be accounted for. In Barad's view, the material world is dynamic, inscribes itself as it unfolds, and is guided and informed by engagement in reciprocal relations. Barad's view of materiality stems directly from her understandings of Nobel Prize winner Niels Bohr's scientific philosophy. Bohr's work involved theorising the results of quantum experiments, in particular, the famous double split experiment, which provided laboratory confirmation that light was *both* a wave *and* a particle. This experiment disrupted the modern understanding of optics, and from there, modern physics as a whole. Depending on how light was measured, it was either a particle, or a wave. According to modern science, these two states are dichotomous, even though this outcome is a logical impossibility.

Bohr responded by theorising that "the nature of the observed phenomenon changes with corresponding changes in the apparatus" (Barad 2007, 106). In other words, the ontological value of the phenomenon is dependent on the epistemological mode of approach. With this

suggestion, Bohr undermined two key assumptions in Newtonian physics - the idea of a world made up of individual objects with determinate qualities, and the notion that scientific measurements would always provide the same objective outcomes. This also substantially undermined Cartesian dynamics, in which the subject and object are fundamentally distinct. In the physical theory that Bohr proposes, subject and object are composed in relation. As Barad notes, Bohr's theorising "shook the very foundation of Western epistemology" (Barad 2007, 97), and provided Barad with the foundation for her own developing material theory.

The world, from Barad's perspective, is best described as an ongoing process of material becoming. Process philosophy is an interdisciplinary project that "is based on the premise that being is dynamic and that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive philosophical account of reality and our place within it"[23]. In a world where things are in constant motion, the stable structures that emerge are patterns within the ongoing dynamics of entanglement.

Barad reminds the scholar that the human (whichever way it is defined) is part of this process of material becoming. She develops a language to discuss the material accountability that humans have to the worlds they help structure. She does this through a discussion of human agency as continually making *cuts* through the process of becoming, which allow separate phenomena to cohere within human understanding. As onto-epistemological actors within the world, knowing-in-being creates known-beings out of the dynamics of material reality.

According to Barad, intra-actions within the world of becoming "cut things together and apart" (Barad 2007, 179). The agential cut can be understood as a foundational feature of the entangled and relational materiality of the world. In the dynamic material world, "space, time and matter are mutually constituted" (Barad 2007, 181) through ongoing "iterative intra-activity" (Barad 2007, 181). The cuts that human agents make in the world help to structure academic domains of enquiry and give shape to the things that are considered to be important.

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[23] Seibt, Johanna, "Process Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/process-philosophy/, accessed on 12 September 2022.

In this regard, Barad suggests that academy enquiry should focus on "responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part" (Barad 2007, 393). Objectivity is then no longer about "producing undistorted representations from afar" (Barad 2007, 91) but rather about producing an "accountability for what materializes" (Barad 2007, 361). This has important implications for the critical study of religion. What agential cuts are instituted by the secular framework that currently distinguishes critical religious studies from theology? If humans participate in the materialisation of known-beings, should critical theory of religion not be prepared to analyse these material dynamic entities?

I have argued that the expansion of materiality that takes place through Chidester's critical approach could allow for a material analysis of other-than-human and invisible agents. However, critical theorists of religion avoid the topic of the gods entirely in order to avoid theological reasoning. The diffraction of posthuman discourse through the critical theory of religion may prove valuable in this regard. Barad's discussion of posthuman accountability, which takes the place of exclusive humanist 'objectivity', could furnish the critical theory of religion with the non-theological grounds to accept responsibility for the task of analysing the invisible agents that emerge within global practice. Rather than objective assessments of the material facts that make up the world, focus could be on accounting for the various ways in which human agency intra-acts with the materialising of invisible agents.

This would move posthuman discourse forward too. Posthuman thinkers have yet to investigate the ways in which secularity is "an epistemic category, and secularism as a political doctrine" (Asad 2003, 01). The ways in which secularism "redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self" (Asad 2003, 01) has profound impacts on the collectives within previously colonised countries. Neither critical theory of religion nor critical posthuman theory accounts for this.

2.4. What is the Matter?

Secular onto-epistemology governs which agential cuts are considered to be legitimate areas of study in modern analysis, and therefore secular closures govern what comes to matter within the academy. The closures ensured through secular reasoning render invisible the practises of non-European and indigenous collectives, through the "stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred" (Asad 2003, 13) in favour of European rational values.

Considering that “black and postcolonial theories have never been loudly secular” (Braidotti 2013, 33), why are the limits of secular enquiry not given the critical treatment that other modern constructions receive? While matter is considered to be vibrant, self-generating and even agentic, the extension of agency to the domain of more-than-human and invisible agents does not form part of critical discourse. Matter is considered to be vibrant and agentic, but due to unexamined secular limits, the turn away from Cartesian materiality and exclusive humanism does not yet allow for the non-secular onto-epistemologies of indigenous collectives to matter on the world stage.

2.4.1. Autopoietic Material

In his book *Order Out of Chaos* (1984), written with colleague Isabella Stengers, chemist Ilya Prigogine (1917 – 2003) suggests that the success of the classical Newtonian world, where only simple systems are open for examination, and where the dynamics of cause and effect are plain enough to map exhaustively, is responsible for a certain kind of disenchantment in the modern academy. He argues that a world ruled by the knowledge of predictable systems is a world devoid of spontaneity, chance, or wonder. Conversely, he suggests that the work being done *beyond* the Newtonian paradigm in the realm of theoretical physics and experimental chemistry suggests a world where order arises out of chaos, allowing for a new range of possibilities, and reigniting a sense of wonder through the sheer complexity of the material dynamics involved.

Newtons physics are founded on the Cartesian ontological split, and attend to the inert matter that is precipitated from the becoming of the world when the human mind is considered to be the only inherently active substance. According to the Newtonian model, “material objects are identifiably discrete; they move only upon an encounter with an external force or agent, and they do so according to a linear logic of cause and effect” (Coole & Frost 2010, 07). Prigogine disrupted this framework on a fundamental level when his chemistry experiments provided empirical demonstrations of self-forming and self-structuring dynamic material.

Rather than examining the aspects of the world that are deterministic and mechanistic, as Newton did, Prigogine turned towards the study of nondeterministic phenomena, processes in nature that are nonreducible, that arise through interactions so complex that no simple laws of cause and effect apply. In particular, he examined chemical systems that are far from states of equilibrium, systems considered to be chaotic, with no established predictability,

and therefore non-tractable within the Newtonian paradigm. What he found was that his petri-dish systems of chemicals, on the edge of chaos in terms of their internal complexity, *under the right conditions gave rise to new, emergent orders of material structure*.

For modern Enlightenment thinkers, the world that Isaac Newton posited was a closed system. Like clockwork, it ran through complex mechanical processes constrained by the laws of Newtonian physics, which all worked within a functioning 'closed box' universe, created by God and navigated by Man. This view of the world greatly augmented the sense of its tractability to empirical study. Newton's mechanical universe contributed to the idea that the human being was positioned perfectly to predict and control the world. However, modern physics demonstrates that the closed, predictable systems that Newton maps are the *special cases*, while the rest of reality unfolds within open, inter-related systems that rebuff Newtons gaze. Prigogine's work "leads to a new view of matter in which matter is no longer the passive substance described in the mechanistic world view but is associated with spontaneous activity" (Prigogine 1984, 09). He won a Nobel prize for this insight, and fueled a multidisciplinary enquiry into the self-organizing qualities of the material world towards the end of the 20th century. Prigogine's experiments with matter that self-assembles and engages in dynamic interactions with its environment has spawned entirely new fields of enquiry in the natural and social sciences.

Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana and his student, Francisco Varela, build on Prigogine's material theory. They introduced the word auto-poiesis (from Greek αὐτο- (auto-) 'self', and ποίησις (poiesis) 'creation, production') in 1972, as part of a discussion on the complexity of living systems. They discuss auto-poiesis emerging within a unified "network of processes" which "continuously regenerate and realize the network of … (relations) that produced them" (Maturana & Varela 1980, 78-79). In other words, the process of material autopoiesis generates the conditions for continued autopoiesis. Put simply, autopoietic material constitutes itself through its continued relational becoming. It pulls itself into mattering through tugging on its own dynamic relational bootstraps. This radical refiguring of networked materiality provides a very different model from that provided by the Cartesian reduction. It presents materiality as a self-generating process, needing no infusion of mind or spirit with which to guide its development.

Prigogine demonstrated that under the right conditions, what was once considered inert matter can engage in self-directed self-assembly. The post-Cartesian discovery of autopoiesis plays a fundamental role in the thinking of the critical posthumanists whose voices I follow in this thesis.

2.4.2. Vibrant Material

Jane Bennett is a new materialist thinker who proposes a vibrant material world in direct opposition to the inert matter of the Cartesian paradigm. The notion of vital matter supplied in Bennett's *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), aims at providing a "positive ontology" of matter, "to induce in human bodies an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality" (Bennett 2010, x). She breaks with the tradition of favouring human lived bodies as the only sites of agentic significance, and instead discusses the vital and agentic materiality that characterises the *physical objects* that make up the world. To better account for these material "nonhuman actants" (Bennett 2010, x), Bennett describes a world that is inherently active, and that does not rely on some transcendent or external force. She warns against the limits of critical thought in regard to the agency of the material world. Instead, attentiveness to "things and their effects" is needed:

> For this task, demystification, that most popular of practices in critical theory, should be used with caution and sparingly, because demystification presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a human agency that has illicitly been projected onto things. (Bennett 2010, xiv)

Bennett's new materialism, while exceeding the boundaries of exclusive humanism, remains firmly secular. She argues that vital material is "thoroughly nontheistic in presentation" (Bennett 2010, 16) and acknowledges that scholars must resist "the temptation in vitalism to spiritualize the vital agent" (Bennett 2010, 81). While she reads vitality into the material becoming of the world, this vitality is negatively defined, through opposition to Christocentric notions of spiritual vitality. As such, she fails to account for the complex relational materiality involved in accounts of religious agency outside of the Christian context, and thereby institutes a modern onto-epistemological limit to her enquiry. While her vital material is post-human, it remains secular, and is therefore limited by modern closures.

What is being 'resisted' in Bennett's exhortation to stay clear of 'spiritual' matters? To 'resist temptation' has decidedly Christian undertones, and points to a moral necessity of some kind. What are the agential cuts that help her define a certain domain as 'spiritual' and the rest as 'material'? What are the justifications she offers for this distinction? Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on her decision to remain 'thoroughly nontheistic' in her account of vibrant material. In Bennett's work the role and the impact of secular onto-epistemologies is not problematised, but remains as a given for rational discourse. In keeping with material religion scholars like Sonia Hazard and Birgit Meyer, physical material is ascribed agency, but the invisible agents implicated in indigenous practice remain eclipsed by the secular frame of reasoning.

2.4.3. Agentic Material

Karen Barad provides a rich conceptual framework for analysing inherently active material, but she also stays clear of discussions that may stray into theological territory. Terms like 'religion', 'god', and 'spirit' do not appear in her pivotal book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), in which she presents a detailed overview of nonhuman agency within posthuman material dynamics. Barad reads agency into the process of material becoming beyond the human by redefining what a *phenomenon* is. She rejects classic modern definitions involving the meeting of subject and object, and instead presents phenomena as "differential patterns of mattering … produced through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material discursive practices" (Barad 2007, 206). According to Barad, differential or diffractive patterns of meaning/mattering constitute all phenomena, as well as the agential processes that make the phenomena.

> …the point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences, but that practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world. Making knowledge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds, it is about making specific worldly configurations – not in the sense of making them up ex nihilo, or out of language, beliefs, or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form. (Barad 2007, 91)

Barad offers a radical reformulation of material agency, but this does not extend to a discussion of the purported religious agencies that people the world. Instead, she is concerned with establishing the "realist tenor" (Barad 2007, 43) of her new onto-epistemological framework. She notes that her discussion of realism "is concerned with the sense in which direct engagement with the ontology of our world is possible" (Barad 2007, 44), and that her work offers an analysis of "real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within and as part of the world" (Barad 2007, 37). What agential cuts is Barad enacting, by figuring the world as ontologically malleable, but excluding the onto-epistemological mattering of invisible agents?

For much of critical posthuman discourse, moving beyond exclusive humanism serves to grant agency to the physical objects that make up the world. In this way, material things are recognised as agential, which disrupts the agential hegemony of the human. However, no agency is granted to the other-than-human and invisible agents implicated in indigenous practices. Materiality is many things in the new millennium, and has shed much of the erroneous associations it gathered during the early modern era. It is vital, dynamic and agential, encompassing the whole of reality, and free from earlier Cartesian cuts. It is also committedly secular.

If critical religious studies were to move beyond exclusive humanism by engaging posthuman conceptual apparatus, should it also uncritically allow the secular mandate to continue limiting enquiry? Is the critical academy, from the study of religion to the study of the human, justified in maintaining materiality as an intrinsically secular domain of becoming?

2.4.4. Secular Material

The domain of secular reason, which developed from European Christian foundations, locks in the Christocentric notion of the 'supernatural', by pushing convincingly against this formation. In the outright rejection of 'supernatural' phenomena, the Christian lens is not examined, and secular reason maintains its 'neutral' position. Although the hegemonic modern distinction between the modern formations of the natural and the supernatural have never been relevant within indigenous domains, the secular academy assumes it is justified in doing away with 'supernatural' phenomena, and all the indigenous world-making practices that supposedly fit within this category. Secular understandings of materiality delimit which "kinds of experience" (Taylor 2007, 14) are possible in the modern world. As such, the

exclusive humanism that this form of secularism promotes can also be called "atheist humanism" (Taylor 2007, 569), and relies on "a withdrawal from certain modes of intimacy" (Taylor 2007, 136-137) in order to construct a world in which only humans come to matter. Critical scholars of religion, in their attempt to cohere a non-theological discipline, have unproblematically accepted the secular framework as a given for a neutral enquiry. However, the conceptual apparatus provided by the idea of the secular is far from problem-free. As discussed in Chapter One, the "opposition to Christianity is formative" of the secular position, and inversions of Christian claims mark the modern usage of the term (Taylor 2007, 01).

Talal Asad agrees with Taylor that the secular domain is constructed in tandem with European Christianity, but he critiques Taylor for overlooking the political implications of this insight. Asad argues that the focus should be on why secularity has become hegemonic as a political and academic goal. Furthermore, he asks "what practical consequences follow from that hegemony, and what social conditions maintain it?" (Asad 2003, 13). One of the practical consequences is the objectification of the 'immanent' domain. Within the modern secular mandate, reality itself has been "reconceived as manipulatable material, determinate, homogeneous, and subject to mechanical laws" (Asad 2003, 27), with anything that exceeds these limits being relegated to the category of "supernatural" (Asad 2003, 27). With this erroneous distinction in place, moving beyond secular reasoning appears to necessitate a move into the supernatural.

Although mind and matter are being collapsed by new material theorists, dynamic and agentic materiality is still defined in opposition to that which is considered 'supernatural'. A dualistic antipathy between secular and supernatural claims is held in place by the modern prerogative. The impact of Christian ontology deeply marks modern thinking as the secular stance is now "the essential defining repertory of the modern identity" (Taylor 2007, 136). Commitments to secular reasoning shapes both posthumanism and critical religious studies along explicit lines of inclusion and exclusion that privilege European onto-epistemological narratives.

2.4.5. Material Erasures

Kim Tallbear discusses the "indigenous metaphysic" in her 2017 article *Beyond the life/not life binary*, presenting it as "an understanding of the intimate knowing relatedness of all things" (Tallbear 2017, 191). Indigenous collectives around the globe can be characterised by this

form of relatedness, which de Sousa Santo's recognises as a feature of the 'epistemologies of the South', which positions "reciprocity and relationality at the antipodes of capitalist and colonialist logics" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 11). Indigenous forms of world-making incorporate nonhuman and invisible others, and have long destabilised the modern "human/nature binary" (Hokowhitu 2020, 134). However, this generative onto-epistemological position has been coded as mythical by modern sensibilities, and does not form part of new materialist or posthuman discourse. This, despite these discourses relying heavily on notions of relationality. As Māori Professor, Brendan Hokowhitu notes, ideas touted as new within posthumanism "already existed in multiple Indigenous philosophies" and in this regard the "the nomenclature of 'new' is simply offensive" (Hokowhitu 2020, 132). By making claims for the novelty of posthuman and new materialist insights, scholars overlook the onto-epistemologies of indigenous collectives.

A vivid example can be found in the Southern African principle of *ubuntu*. Philosopher Mogobe Ramose explains that "ubuntu may be seen as the basis of African philosophy" (Ramose 2005, 35). It signifies the "indivisible one-ness and whole-ness of ontology and epistemology" (Ramose 2005, 36), where these two modern constructs are "understood as two aspects of one and the same reality" (Ramose 2005, 35). The awareness of the entanglement between ontology and epistemology is not something dreamed up by feminists posthumans in the last decades of the 2nd millennium. Rather, posthuman thinkers have finally addressed an erroneous limit within the northern canon, bringing it closer in line with the principles of the global south.

Posthumanists who have not yet seen the relevance of alternate onto-epistemologies also overlook the violence done to indigenous collectives. Philosopher and African American studies scholar, Axelle Karera, argues that "Braidotti's becoming-posthumanist strives for the actualization of a community-to-come" but seems to overlook "the atrocious making of "another people" by slavery and the responsibility such violent history bestows on the Western world" (Karera 2019, 44). By not accounting directly for race-based agential cuts, critical posthuman thinkers reveal a blind spot (Karera 2019; Jackson 2015). This blind spot enforces a racial limit within the onto-epistemological project of posthumanism. It continues with the colonial tradition of excluding key narratives from the world stage through a hegemonic hold on knowledge production.

Critical theory of religion differs quite sharpy from critical posthumanism in this regard. Critical religious studies scholars actively strive to account for hegemonic racial exclusions within past and present areas of research. That said, as a secular project there is no motivation to engage with the onto-epistemological positions of those collectives who were relegated to the abyssal side of the line during the colonial era.

In both critical theory of religion and critical posthumanism there are "fundamental questions of racial culpability" (Karera 2019, 44) that are ignored. Karera suggests that posthumanists engage "a short-sighted conception of "becoming" and an "aggrandized notion of ontological relationality" (Karera 2019, 44). She argues that the lack of accountability for "past and current imperial injustices" (Karera 2019, 33) within posthuman discourse belies the new ethics that this discourse attempts to engage.

If "objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which we are a part" (Barad 2018, 91) then an accounting for the agential cuts that constitute racial injustice moves scholars closer to an objective reckoning of the world. One of the cuts that needs attention is the one that defines and delineates secular discourse. The secular as a material formation acts in concert with exclusive humanism and imperial modernity to foreclose on the knowledge-making practices of collectives that have been rendered abyssal. As such, secular distinctions enact a cut that encourages ongoing erasure of onto-epistemologies that do not originate in westernised spaces. Many of these erasures are of indigenous and black onto-epistemologies. Historically, the world-making practices that originate in indigenous collectives have been considered as 'irrational' belief in the 'supernatural', and therefore both vilified and excluded from serious consideration.

Rosi Braidotti acknowledges this briefly in her mention of the *post-secular*. She problematises the exclusive humanist dedication to secular atheism, and its "instinctive form of aversion to religion" (Braidotti 2013, 32). She notes the importance of a "spiritual" dimension in the work of 20th century feminists like Alice Walker, Mary Daly, and Luce Irigaray, amongst others. That said, Braidotti's indirect attempt at accounting for the post-secular, and allowing for the voices of black feminists, does not constitute a clear acknowledgement of the secular problem within critical postmodern discourse. As secularity is intimately entangled with European Christianity, it is not a neutral position. It is Eurocentric and imperialist and continues with the colonisation of knowledge that keeps certain forms of power in place.

2.4.6. Supernatural Material

It is salient to my current thesis that the "natural-supernatural opposition took root and flourished in the soil of Christianity" (Saler 1977, 38), and that this separation does not exist within non-Christocentric cultures (Levy-Bruhl 1936, 05). Emile Durkheim, in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1965) suggests that the notion of the supernatural presupposes the existence of a "natural order of things" (Durkheim 1965, 41). Those who do not ascribe to this rational categorisation of the 'natural order' have historically received discipline and education, to lead them towards rational thinking, and to neutralise the threat they pose to Eurocentric values.

The use of the term supernatural, and its association with irrationality, disenfranchises indigenous onto-epistemologies. With black people making up the majority of these collectives, the natural-supernatural distinction also underlies a race-based cut through the becoming of the world. The notion that black people in the colonies engaged spurious 'supernatural' practices justified the cut made them appear 'unnatural', and furthermore, not fully human (Mndende 1998, 115). The link between peoples considered irrational, and those same peoples being declared 'lesser than' European peoples, has been the basis for many violent policy decisions within the world at large. As such, the natural-supernatural distinction makes visible "the material tie that the present has to the past, not just any past but what we may call a wounded and wounding past" (Ortega 2019, 134). The construction and distinction of 'nature' as opposed to 'supernature' has long been responsible for dehumanising a large portion of the global population.

This distinction is visible in critical theory of religion, as well as the new materialist and posthuman discourses that inform this domain. Although the supernatural is not mentioned by name in the work of any of the theorists I have been considering, the conspicuous absence of categories which would be classed as supernatural within secular discourse is noted. Why are critical currents within academia, committed to the deconstruction and revision of erroneous modern categories, still bounded by secular prerogatives?

Alfred Hallowell notes that "the natural-supernatural antithesis has had its own complex history in Western thought" (Hallowell 1960, 28). Current usage of the term 'supernatural' can be traced back to early 15th century Europe, from Medieval Latin *supernaturalis* "above

or beyond nature, divine"[24].As such, it is a Christocentric construction, reflecting religious developments in Europe over the course of the 2nd millennium.

Irving Hallowell argues that the "natural-supernatural dichotomy" should not be invoked when describing the "outlook of peoples" (Hallowell 1960, 28) in "non-Western" cultures. Benjamin Saler agrees, and notes that "it is misleading to refer to beings or powers in non-Western world views as 'supernatural' when supernatural is not salient" (Saler 1977, 51). Within African indigenous cosmology there is no separation between the supernatural and the natural, as both exist within "the single realm of reality" (Molefe and Maraganedzha 2022, 05). The word used by African scholars to describe this is 'holism', which denotes "the state of things caught up in perpetual relationships with others" (Molefe and Maraganedzha 2022, 05). Within this holistic understanding of the world, there is no dichotomous distinction between visible and invisible persons.

Abandoning the distinction between the natural and the supernatural does not mean that scholarship defaults to a world full of supernatural phenomena, but that a paradigm shift takes place. Munyaradzi Mawere notes that "the puzzle of how the immaterial spiritual entities come to interact and continue to influence the activities of the living does not arise for the Africans" (Mawere 2011, 19). Within African cosmologies, the dichotomies set up though modern distinctions don't feature as relevant, and therefore do not present as paradoxical. In spaces where the supernatural has never existed as a distinct category, the world is not overcome by supernatural phenomena, but instead understood in the holistic terms of relationality.

Contemporary scholarship recognises that any language used to frame an academic investigation is already conditioned by certain types of suppositions about reality. In the study of religion, when modern scholars use the terms 'natural', its silent and invisible counterpart is the 'supernatural'. Although critical religion scholars are now engaging discussions of how religious practice is material in as much as it *matters*, the inherited shadow of the supernatural is still a confounding distinction in academic thinking, and one that gets in the

[24] "Supernatural", Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed on 4 August 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/word/supernatural,

way of further enquiry. The ghostly existence of this cancelled-out word does not allow scholars to get any closer to a coherent study of religion.

Scholars facing this ghost of a category often perform a conceptual sleight-of-hand. Secular research, particularly in the push towards a new materialism, tends to fold the domain once designated supernatural into the domain designated material, where it dissolves without remainder. The secular academy finds itself in a position to defend critical a new materialism as the final defeat of metaphysical meanderings, a death knell to anything once deemed 'spiritual'. The complex and dynamic materiality described by critical religion scholars, in this view, closes around the supernatural domain like water over a doomed ocean liner. Once it has sunk below the surface, it leaves no trace of really having mattered at all. The resulting material domain is 'everything that matters' but not *that.*

In this view, matters of spiritual agency, and nonhuman, invisible or more-than-human *persons*, are generally examined only within the limits of nature and culture. As invisible forms of agency are engaged by collectives considered to be 'primitive' or possibly just ignorant, they are subject to critical deconstruction, and thereby completely undone, with little consequence to modern reckonings of the world.

However, if critical scholars were to take seriously the call to integrate alternate onto-epistemologies, the many new materialisms need not denote the end of phenomena deemed supernatural. Rather, attention can turn to indigenous world-making practices where the initial distinction between nature and supernature never took hold. In this case, another possible outcome of folding the supernatural into the natural is the *preservation* of the dimensions to which the supernatural once referred, by allowing materiality to expand accordingly. This move involves a radical decolonisation of basic humanist onto-epistemological constructs, not in favour of handing over authority to religion, but in honour of a complex, relational and incomplete world that humbles our intentions at every turn. This liberated, nonsecular view of materiality has space for invisible agents and can support the labour needed to make sense of them.

Bruno Latour writes in *Reassembling the Social* "why not say that in religion what counts are the beings that make people act, just as every believer has always insisted?" (Latour 2005, 235). Matthew Day, building on Latour's position, suggests that "those of us who fantasize about what our jobs might look like after the demise of 'religion' should gather our courage

and liberate the gods. Once we do this, we can then start attending to the networks from which these actors emerge and the labour required to make them real and obvious" (Day 2010, 281). In recent decades, the academic study of religion has produced important and necessary work in the effort to extract theory and method from the colonial morass that was early religion studies. However, the very identity of religious studies within the academy remains unstable, as key critical religion scholars argue to dissolve religious studies departments entirely. A turn to the dynamics of indigenous world-making changes this discourse in important ways.

As a general theme, indigenous knowledge systems account for the category designated 'supernatural' in ways that rely on complex practices of relationality. These frameworks remain relatively opaque to contemporary scholarship. The reduction and elimination of the supernatural within critical studies continues to obscure indigenous positions. A *critically inclusive* study of religion could account for this colonially driven onto-epistemicide within the academy, and following this, could work on pragmatic and active redress.

In regard to South African religious studies scholarship, this would involve acknowledging and addressing the material onto-epistemicide that European colonisers wreaked on African collectives. The abyssal exclusions that accompanied colonial developments require accounting for.

2.5. Framing the Nonmodern

Bruno Latour wrote that the "antimoderns, like the postmoderns, have accepted their adver-saries' playing field. Another field - much broader, much less polemical - has opened up before us: the field of nonmodern worlds" (Latour 1993, 48). Latour discusses the category of the nonmodern extensively in his work, and this has provided a base from which I continue to develop this important heuristic. I extend his appraisal of the nonmodern domain to enquire into indigenous world-making practices, and the ways in which they are excluded from mattering within modern collectives. I also argue that a critical appraisal of the indigenous nonmodern cannot rest on the conclusion that indigenous collectives are isolated groupings with no resonance between different geographical locations. While there is definitely a heterogeneity that requires accounting for, claiming that isolated indigenous groupings cannot matter on a global scale is resorting to the hegemonic tactics of European imperialism. I suggest that there are some core approaches to world-making within

geographically distinct collectives that form a global resonance, and thereby constitute a coherent presence on the world stage, alongside world-religions and secular practices.

2.5.1. Latour's Nonmodern

Bruno Latour proposes the category nonmodern as a domain in which "everything happens" but which "does not exist" and "has no place" because it is "the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns" (Latour 1993, 37). The nonmodern forms the 'Middle Kingdom', a domain of active becoming Latour uses to reflect on the limits of modernity.

Latour presents the nonmodern as "no man's-land, a nonplace" (Latour 1993, 96) in modern discourse, a space which emerges between the pure forms of culture (subject) and nature (object). He highlights the trouble that modern collectives create by separating objects from subjects. In Latour's understanding, this separation creates the illusion of the modern individual[25]. Latour writes that "because it believes in the total separation of humans and nonhumans, and because it simultaneously cancels out this separation" (Latour 1993, 37) the modern project considers itself invincible, despite the abundance of relational agents that are not being accounted for. He calls these overlooked agents *hybrids*, as they resist purification into the categories of nature or culture, and retain characteristics of both. For Latour, hybrid agents arise through networked processes of dynamic materiality, and exist in the un-acknowledged spaces between the modern domains of nature and culture.

Talal Asad uses the term nonmodern to refer to "peoples who are invited to assess their adequacy" (Asad 2003, 14) in the face of modern secular mandates. He argues that the world is divided into "modern and nonmodern" (Asad 2003, 14) through epistemological hegemony, with the cut happening along western divides, and overseen by secular developments. Asad's use of the term nonmodern coincides with Boaventura de Sousa Santos' discussion of the epistemologies of the South, and the abyssal knowledges that are eclipsed within current critical discourse.

[25] This resonates with Charles Taylor's discussion of porosity and buffering in the making of the modern project. Taylor associates the buffering of the modern individual with exclusive humanism and ongoing secular developments. The buffered individual does not need to account for porous relationality, as this porosity is rejected. Reading Taylor's conceptual apparatus into Latour's nonmodern, this domain can be considered a domain of generative porosity that refuses 'purification' into modern buffered categories, and actively produces agential relations.

Adding to Latour's discussion, I will read Asad and de Sousa Santos into the discourse, and argue that the nonmodern domain has a political position, and is constructed along the abyssal line that world-religions and secular policy makers draw around their developing metropolitan[26] practices. In the historical drawing of this line, the heterogenous becomings outside of Europe were reduced to the flattened other. In this regard, religion and the secular in European history act in tandem to produce the nonmodern as a homogenous domain, and make absent the multiple relational agencies that cohere within that domain.

I use the term nonmodern as well as 'indigenous', as there is an important distinction to be made between these two categories. In my understanding, indigeneity is a term located to, and necessary for, specific land-claims. Indigenous collectives are local by definition. Indigeneity in this regard references forms of pre-nation-state collective becoming that survive in the current world within land-based enclaves. In modern contestations around property ownership, indigeneity matters to specific legal discourses. This usage of the term localises the indigenous around specific geographical spaces, which is necessary to countermand colonial land claims. On the other hand, the nonmodern signifies a global process of becoming, made of a multitude of localised indigenous collectives.

My usage of the term nonmodern extends beyond the pivotal geographical focus on indigeneity, and engages the global mattering of these collectives. I propose that the category nonmodern emerges after modern world-making practices have hegemonically refracted through indigenous spaces. Once modernity makes itself felt, indigenous spaces are reformulated into domains of nature and culture in dialectic with the modern prerogative. The indigenous *becomes* the nonmodern when modernity intrudes. Framed by the modern prerogative, the positive characteristics of indigeneity are abraded, and only the negatively valanced nonmodern remains. On this distinction, indigenous collectives are shrinking and nonmodern collectives are growing as modernity progresses.

[26] In *Epistemologies of the South* (2018), Boaventura de Sousa Santos uses the term 'metropolitan' to refer to collectives on the non-abyssal side of the line.

2.5.2. The Indigenous Nonmodern

The term 'indigenous' is derived from the Latin *indigena* 'a native'. Historically, indigenous people from the European countryside were known in ancient Rome as *pagans* (rustic villagers). When Rome turned to imperial monotheism, the term pagan became a pejorative for people not aligned with Christian politics, and paganism came to be seen as both anti-state and anti-religion. Non-Europeans, in as much as they were non-Christian, were also considered to be pagan. This reductive term flattened a multiplicity of global becomings into one pejorative category, to be used as a foil in the hegemonic pursuit of Europe's goals during the early colonial era.

As the millennium progressed, distinctions were made between various kinds of non-European collectives. Judaism and Islam were recognised as forms of Abrahamic religion, alongside Christianity. Peoples with a history of written texts, like those found in India and China, were also rescued from the category pagan, and were considered to be practicing alternate versions of world-religion. Those collectives who did not rely on the authority of written texts, who relied instead on verbal and experiential transmission of embodied knowledges, were given the designation of 'primal' (Cox 2007, 23). According to popular 19th and early 20th century discourse, primal religions were primitive versions of the more respectable world-religions. However, as the century progressed, it became apparent that this designation continued to disenfranchise non-European collectives.

To intervene in this hegemonic discourse, scholars began replacing the word primal with the word 'indigenous'. Although there is no universally agreed upon definition of indigeneity (Henriksen 2008, 05), there have been some important movements towards developing legal definitions of this term in recent decades. Special-Rapporteur of the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, José Martinez Cobo, defines indigenous peoples as "those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them" (Cobo 2008, 05). The International Labor Organization (ILO) offers a definition too, arguing that indigenous peoples are those who descend "from populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present states boundaries" (Cobo 2008, 06). These definitions are provided

in the process of negotiating the legal rights of contemporary indigenous collectives, and serve to cohere a land-based identity for indigenous peoples that allows for legal agency in property disputes.

In 1989, the Indigenous and Tribal People's Convention (No. 169), a project supported by the United Nations, documented an agreement between multiple countries, allowing for the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and noting in Article 14 "the rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy"[27]. As of August 2008, only 19 of the 192 UN member states had ratified the agreement (Henriksen 2008, 13). Of these 19 countries, only four were European (Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Spain) and the UK was not among them[28].

The legal instruments that are being developed around the rights of indigenous people "are intended to allow for a high degree of autonomous development" (Henriksen 2008, 10), within specific geographical spaces, and can therefore be viewed as "a serious challenge to the core functions of the nation state" (Henriksen 2008, 10-11). As such, collectives seeking recourse through indigenous rights initiatives face grave oppression, and have yet to successfully shift the status quo within the modern legal domain.

In addition to the indigenous collectives who have been subsumed in the category of the nonmodern, there are a growing number of people who are joining the nonmodern position through turning away from modern onto-epistemologies to explore their roots (Clifford 2013, 17). Through this turn, and through the developing imperative to redress the atrocities of the colonial era, indigenous peoples are becoming "visible actors in local, national, and global

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[27] International Labour Organization "C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)", accessed on 12 February 2023, https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169

[28] In October 2022, the UK Parliament tabled an "Early day motion" (EDM) to adopt the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention. The motion notes "with sadness" the death of the last remaining member of the Tanaru Indigenous peoples, whose death "represents a symbol of indigenous genocide". It "notes with concern" that the UK has not yet ratified Convention No. 169, "despite British companies operating and trading with others within the Amazon region and other tribal areas". EDMs are "motions submitted for debate in the House of Commons for which no day has been fixed" (from UK Parliament website). This motion has received 14 signatures of support from the 650 MP's that make up the UK Parliament. Although the number of signatures does not affect the likelihood of the motion being adopted into law, it does indicate current level of interest amongst member of the UK parliament.

arenas" (Clifford 2013, 13). When indigenous onto-epistemologies are considered on a global scale, it becomes evident that they are not simply heterogenous collectives brought together by shared historical oppression. There are also positive characteristics of this nonmodern position, which resonate amongst indigenous collectives the world over.

2.5.3. The Resonant Nonmodern

Indigenous peoples all [speak many] different languages but in our meetings, we are speaking one language. Our relationship to Mother Earth is identical.

- U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon

Much work is underway to engage and understand various indigenous collective practices, but the global nonmodern remains under-theorised. This is not to say that a universalising theory of the nonmodern is needed. A 'universal', as constructed through European onto-epistemological developments, requires a homogeneity that rarely exists in the practical making of the world. The historical notion of universality relies on 19th century understandings of the laws of nature. However, with Einstein's insights into the nature of time and space itself, the notion of absolute reference points, even within the natural domain, developed into understandings of the particular conditions needed to bring coherence to purported universals. Even the once irrefutable laws of physics break down when the dynamics of special relativity are involved. In the preface to his book *The Special Theory of Relativity* (1996), David Bohm notes the following:

> Einstein's basically new step was in the adoption of a *relational* approach to physics. Instead of supposing that the task of physics is the study of an absolute underlying *substance* of the universe (such as the ether) he suggested that it is only in the study of *relationships* between various aspects of this universe, relationships that are in principle observable. (Bohm 1996, vii)

Bridging between physics and critical humanities, I hope to contribute to a *global* theory of the nonmodern rather than a universal one. Rather than theorising a universal underlying substance to the nonmodern, I will discuss the material relations that make nonmodern spaces matter on a global scale.

For this, a little strategic essentialism is required. Gayatri Spivak, when discussing the identity of the subaltern on the world stage, suggests that the ability to strategically see a group as "adhering to the essentialist notion" (Spivak 1996, 225) enhances the groups political position. This involves temporarily downplaying group differences, and assuming an uncomplicated unity (Eide 2016, 02), in order to make visible the identities of formerly invisible peoples. Invoking strategic essentialism discussions of the global nonmodern goes a long way towards addressing colonial erasures. In addition to political dynamics, the material dynamics that make up the nonmodern also provide important structures.

Resonances are patterns that form within complex spaces of differentiation. The notion of resonance is important for understanding the patterns that emerge amongst the varying nonmodern collectives. Using the language of physics, resonance is understood as the propagation of vibration across varying mediums. Vibrational frequencies set the structural tone of the material world. An object that vibrates at a certain frequency, like a bell that has been struck, propagates waves of material motion through surrounding objects. In this way, material that is not physically touching the bell, vibrates along with the bell. Resonance presents a network of vibrations that link disparate objects into a coherent dynamic system. Within the complex and heterogenous spaces that make up the nonmodern domain, there are resonances that cohere beyond geographical and historical limits. These resonances show up in patterns of world-making practices across multiple places and times, and most particularly in the dynamic and porous notions of material agency that shape nonmodern relations.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos notes that collectives relegated to the abyssal side of the line by modern discourse are "made local and therefore irrelevant" by modern knowledge, which is seen as "the sole generator of global experiences" (de Sousa Santos 2007, 34). He argues that "since the resistance against abyssal lines must take place on a global scale" it is important that "local-global linkages" (de Sousa Santos 2007, 34) be made to support the indigenous experience. Without acknowledging material resonances between various nonmodern collectives, the indigenous peoples that maintain their identity in the modern world are isolated to their specific locations. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, when decrying the epistemicide that underlies the modern project, notes that "epistemologies of the South" are

no longer confined to geographical locations, but must be accepted as global and political (de Sousa Santos 2018, 271).

James Cox offers an important definition of indigeneity in his 2007 book *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions.* He suggest that indigenous collectives are defined by three main features, their locality to a certain piece of land, their focus on relationality as primary to world-making, and their engagement of oral transmission technologies in the process of knowledge-production (Cox 2007, 61). He argues that "the primary characteristic of Indigenous Religions refers to its being bound to a location; participants in the religion are native to a place" (Cox 2007, 69). Based on this, he suggests that "what we can say about indigeneity is severely restricted to locality and kinship" and that "by definition, kinship-based religions are not and cannot be universal" (Cox 2007, 69). He provides evidence for this by arguing that "Indigenous Religions are restricted cosmologically because their spirit world is organized around a system of lineage" (Cox 2007, 69). His study of indigenous religions erases the onto-epistemological significance of more-than-human kinship networks that extend beyond the human and into the world at large. Cox's conclusion about indigeneity produces alienated indigenous collectives, stranded in uniquely localised positions, and mortally threatened by the cohesion of the 'universal' modern narrative.

Localising black and indigenous knowledges to specific geographical locations ensures a minimisation of their power, and follows lines of reasoning that are not applied to world-religions. The reduction of indigenous world-making practices to isolated locations is a continuation of colonial imperatives, and actively works against the integration of the knowledges generated within indigenous spaces. This can be further unpacked through the feminist insights into the localised and lived body. In the critical feminist posthuman framework, the individual body is unique and localised, but it is also intrinsically connected to the becoming of the world through material dynamics, and therefore delightfully relational and multiplicitous. Critical feminist thinkers provide an important reminder that local does not equal limited.

The homogenous 'universal' belies the cosmological intimacy of extended relation. Through the development of European Imperialism, Cartesian divisions, and the Protestant Reformation, the embodied significance of the cosmos was lost. To replace this relational matrix, modern thinkers attempt to construct a cosmos-spanning concept – the universal –

which matters *more* than embodied relation. The universal, as opposed to the local, becomes the point of focus for modern progress. Mirroring the Cartesian cut, these two options are seen as utterly distinct, the local cannot touch the universal, just as Protestant Man cannot touch the Protestant God. However, in a world where the complexity of becoming is not cut into two parts, the dualism of local/universal fails. Instead, there is complex material becoming-in-relation. The entire cosmos is spanned by relation. Tracing lines of mattering within situated knowledge reveals the complex dynamics of the power relations that are enacted through material becoming. The localised lived body is both situated and universalised in the uncovering of this network of connections.

When Cox declares that "by definition, kinship-based religions are not and cannot be universal" (Cox 2007, 69) he is making an onto-epistemological error, founded on modern exclusionary tactics. The situated subject is not the isolated subject. The isolated subject is a modern invention. It subsists through an onto-epistemology that performs agentic cuts at the limits of 'mind' and 'matter'. This closure follows the censure and erasure of embodied knowledges and practices involving relations with other-than-human persons. However, it is precisely this network of intimate lived-relations that positively characterises the becoming of indigenous collectives. More-than-human relationality extends the lived-body into the space of global relations.

With the nonmodern as a point of focus, scholars of religion might devise approaches that are neither theological nor secular. In doing so, the move beyond modern hegemonies would be further facilitated. The global presence of the nonmodern as a heuristic unit reflects dynamics of resonance and relation, and might provide language to broaden discourse on the importance of alternate world-making practices on the global stage. In accounting for the nonmodern, the critical study of religion moves beyond the modern limits.

Cox attempts to remedy earlier distinctions in the study of religion with his move to grounding indigeneity as a significant term, and thereby moving past discussions of primitivity or primality. However, his positioning, which does not require him to move beyond modern limits, allows him to ignore the complex onto-epistemologies of the indigenous collectives that he encounters, reducing them to the disenchanted metrics of land possession and lineage claims. With modern politics and economics continuing to transform geographical

indigenous locations, nonmodern collectives with clear historical links to land grow sparse, and on this definition, “Indigenous Religion” will eventually fade away entirely.

I have argued that there is more to the nonmodern, and its indigenous aspects, than critically endangered geographical spaces occupied by people with ancestral links to land. The ongoing material circulation of specific world-making practices still needs accounting for. The opposite of Europe’s imagined universal unity is imagined primal chaos, taking over where modern purifications break down. However, contemporary nonmodern becomings contribute to a globally resonant structure, with harmonics that span continents, mattering even in modern spaces. These harmonics and resonances coalesce around patterns of agentic relation that characterise the nonmodern domain.

2.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the history of exclusive humanism within the construction of the modern project. I have also investigated the ways in which a new materialism, as a conceptual foundation for both critical theory of religion and critical posthuman theory, begins to move past the limits of exclusive human. In this regard, material religious studies scholarship begins to converge with scholarship that falls with the domain of the posthumanism. To further explicate the emerging posthuman positions within the material study of religion, I engaged the ideas and interventions of a few key posthuman thinkers, and indicated where posthuman concepts and methods might be of further value to critical religion studies.

That said, I have argued that an engagement with posthumanism as it currently stands is not altogether sufficient for an inclusive critical study of religion. Although critical scholars discuss the potential of vibrant, autopoietic and even agentic material, a limit is enacted at the edge of the secular frame. While critical posthumanism offers the study of religion valuable frameworks for moving beyond exclusive humanism, it runs into abyssal limits. These limits are constructed along race-based cuts that remain justified by hegemonic and imperialist postcolonial structures. Both critical religion and critical posthuman scholars have yet to account for the impact of the abyssal line on their intellectual frameworks. The ongoing erasure of epistemologies and ontologies that do not align with secular closures is a process that demands accounting for.

As I turn from the familiarity of knowledge-making in the northern canon, towards the worlds of the global south, I still rely on thinkers from the non-abyssal side of the line to inform the bridgework that I am doing. The work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos in particular provides me with material to construct a bridge within the domain of religious studies, to link this burgeoning discipline with the plethora of data beyond the abyssal line.

Leaning also on Bruno Latour, I suggest that a closer look at the heuristic domain of the nonmodern might provide conceptual apparatus for moving beyond the modern limits imposed by secular reasoning. The nonmodern domain provides a rich and nuanced ground of enquiry for religious studies scholars. By engaging with the onto-epistemological value of nonmodern world-making practices, critical scholars of religion might be equipped to further deconstruct modern hegemonies within the study of religion. In the following chapter I will continue to develop my discussion of the nonmodern domain, and take a closer look at the abyssal exclusions enacted by scholars who remain committed to secular limits. The nonmodern, as a heuristic category that exists alongside the domains of world-religion and secular rhetoric, requires critical attention.

CHAPTER 3: ACCOUNTING FOR ABSENCE

Absence, as well as presence, engenders effects, tracing the contours of bodies, spaces, and histories through its peculiar power for evoking anxieties, nostalgia, and curiosity... Absence and presence are mutually implicated and constituted.

- Blanes & Espírito Santo

3.1. Introduction

The critical study of religion within the modern research university has historically been limited by both exclusive humanism and the ascendency of secular world-making practices. Although some scholars have begun to question the role of the human in religious affairs, research still respects secular limitations. When posthuman and critical religion theorists make clear their secular commitments, they present critiques that cohere within a hegemonic onto-epistemological domain. These approaches overlook the salience of alternate onto-epistemologies. While critical theorists in many disciplines labour to remedy multiple exclusions enacted under the guise of modernity, work remains to attend to the secular exclusions that impact present world-making practices within the academy.

In response to this challenge, I propose to add the critical analysis of *material absence* as a 4th step in the method that I am developing using Chidester's lenses. Along with the discernment and examination of material categories, formations and circulations in religion, it is necessary to enquire into material absences. To foreground absence in the study of religion I turn to Bruno Latour's discussion on the invention of belief. I also engage further with Boaventura de Sousa Santos' theory of the abyssal line, and the abyssal exclusions that follow from the history of European discourse on religion. I suggest that absence is produced in relation to both world-religion and modern secular rhetoric, and that this absence forms a salient third position that falls outside of these dichotomous constructs.

As part of unpacking this third position, a domain which is neither religion nor secular as the terms are currently understood, I will argue that the contemporary nonmodern domain offers generative ground for engagement. The aspect of the nonmodern that I am focusing on is the

practices that generate agential relations beyond the limits of world-religion and secular ratifications. These practices cohere around values that point to the deeply relational becoming of the world, in which agential bounds do not follow modern strictures. As these practices do not cohere around written texts, they do not easily interface with the technologies needed to negotiate power within the modern nation-state, and are therefore undervalued.

I will argue that the third-position coheres on the abyssal side of the line, at the limits drawn by racial distinctions, and following the lines of colonial category formation. This abyssal line separates indigenous onto-epistemologies from the dominant western onto-epistemological framework that continues to be upheld within modern scholarship. While alternative world-making practices are acknowledged within the academy, an integration of alternate practices has yet to be considered by secular scholars. As such, both critical religious studies and critical posthumanism overlooks the wealth of practical and philosophical insight generated within abyssal nonmodern domains. For critical scholars, secular boundaries ensure the continued erasure of nonmodern matters.

The discussion of material absences in the religious studies domain forms a large part of the bridgework that I deem necessary for the continued development of the discipline. As I am working from within the northern canon, I point to the secular/religious split as a foundational construct around which this canon coheres. A critical discussion of material absences within the secular study of religion opens the possibility of a non-secular approach, which is also not 'religious' in the ways that define traditional world-religions. This approach would rest on the material presences of previously absented world-making practices.

To lay the foundations for non-secular research in the study of religion, I discuss the approaches to knowledge generation that have developed in indigenous spaces. I follow this with a discussion of the recent 'ontological' turn in anthropology, and examine the ways in which modern onto-epistemological reasoning is disrupted by this development. Finally I will argue that the constructs of 'nature' and 'culture' rely on modern secular values, and have worked towards the establishment of the abyssal line. Even the current amalgamation of these terms into a 'natureculture' continuum is limited by secular world-making practice, and therefore contributes to the material absences which still plague the critical study of religion.

3.2. Absence in the Study of Religion

In this section I will discuss how dynamic material absences can be tracked by examining abyssal exclusions. Engaging a material dynamics of absence broadens the critical purview in non-theological religious studies. With the move towards posthumanism, categories once considered irredeemably theological have been resuscitated and enquired into using critical conceptual apparatus. Furthermore, to address the secular limits in both critical theory of religion and critical posthumanism, absences can be tracked by attending to the abyssal line in modern scholarship, and the epistemologies of the South that cohere beyond it. In this way, a critical study of religion that is both non-theological and nonsecular becomes possible.

In some key regards, indigenous, pagan and black popular practices around the world are rendered invisible by critical theorists (de Sousa Santos 2018, 09). De Sousa Santos argues that the presence of the abyssal line in modern scholarship renders multiple collectives "incapable of representing the world as their own in their own terms, and thus of considering the world as susceptible to being changed by their own power and for their own objectives" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 08). While non-theological scholars in the study of religion adopt critical thinking to avoid the earlier mistakes of theological reasoning, the explicitly secular commitments involved in the critical approach is not sufficient for the ongoing establishment of religious studies as a discipline in the 21st century.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, an opening to the nonsecular appears in Chidester's material approach. Through this approach, the mattering of invisible agents could become a point of critical concern. When working towards a nonsecular approach to the study of religion, important questions emerge. What of the *absences* that have been generated through centuries of commitment to secular reasoning? What *material dynamics of absence* are enacted within the current formations around the category of invisible agents? In what ways are the agents that cohere on the abyssal side of the line excluded from critical accounting? In what material ways do they still circulate, despite abyssal closures? It may be time to attempt a study of religion that opens to the possibilities inherent in indigenous, pagan and black onto-epistemologies.

3.2.1. Material Dynamics of Absence

After moving beyond modern exclusive humanism in the critical study of religion, an aporia becomes visible, at the edge of secular reason. I have argued that religion scholars have a responsibility to account for the material absences that constitute secular practices. As part of exploring the material dynamics of absence in the study of religion, I will argue that what is absented by both religion and secular reason makes up a salient third-position on the global stage. This third-position represents the heterogenous world-making practices of collectives that are othered by both world-religion and secular discourse. Through attending to the material dynamics of absence in critical religious studies, I perform a local cartography of the abyssal line. This may help remedy the "radical invisibility and irrelevance" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 25) of multiple world-making practices in the critical theory of religion.

In the material dynamics of religion that Chidester presents, focus is on the active presence of formations and circulations in material religion. The object of religion is dynamic and material, and the method of examining this object coheres around the dynamic patterns that material religion forms. However, this object is decidedly secular.

Chidester acknowledges the work of African Studies professor Harry Garuba, noting that Garuba's "recovery of animist realism" is in keeping with recent inter-disciplinary developments around "entanglements of humans and things…which are at work and at play in producing the sacred" (Chidester 2018, 04). However, Chidester's position appears to be highlighting the 'realism' aspect of Garuba in the animism debate. He leans on his own interpretation of the sacred as a human construction involving material objects. As such, he does not stray into the territory of nonsecular reason. While Chidester addresses the category of 'animism' in his overview of the material dynamics of religion, he does not address or explore the nonhuman and invisible persons associated with 'animistic' religious practices.

What agential cuts are implicated in the secular onto-epistemological strategies that critical religious studies engages? I have argued from a posthuman perspective that agential cuts make the world, and bear accounting for. Furthermore, I have argued that even with the foregrounding of material agency beyond the human, a secular limit still renders many agents abyssal. In this way, critical religious studies limits the mattering of invisible persons according to secular commitments. Made absent by their lack of salience to the critical project, these

persons, and the relations that bring them to matter, are overlooked in current religious studies discourse.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos embarks on a what he calls a *sociology of absence*, in which he points to the role of the abyssal line in producing "many practices, knowledges, and agents" as "nonexistent" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 08). In many important ways, that which has been made absent still matters to the case at hand. Material absences shape and influence the human experience of the world (Bille et al. 2010, 04). Absence can be considered as "corporeal, emotional and sensuous" (Bille et al. 2010, 03) through the material effects it has.

De Sousa Santos writes that "the sociology of absences must go beyond Eurocentric critical thinking" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 26) if the epistemologies beyond the abyssal line are going to matter. For this to be possible, he suggests a process that, like Chidester's, firstly critiques received categories, but then he suggests recognition and engagement with "other ways of knowing that offer alternative understandings" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 26). For the purpose of this thesis, the absences I will be investigating cohere within the heterogenous nonmodern domain against which the secular world and organised world-religion takes shape. I will explore the categories usually associated with this domain, as well as investigate alternative strategies for ongoing critical analysis.

3.2.2. Unworlded Religion

One of the principle classifications in the early imperialist study of religion was between 'world-religions', which centered around sacred texts, and 'savage' or 'superstitious' practices, which did not. I will argue that indigenous religions were unworlded by the universalist mandate of the modern era. The modern academy invented the category of world-religion during the 19th century (Chidester 2018, 43), and by the early 20th century, world-religions came to designate those that "have sacred texts and a cumulative tradition that builds and develops" (Smith 1991, 367). Protestant scholar, Huston Smith (1919-2016), a highly influential contributor to the academic study of religion in the mid 20th century, wrote a book entitled *The World's Religions* in 1958. In it, he focused on the seven "major historical religions" (Smith 1991, 367) which he listed as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Tellingly, the book concludes with a final chapter on 'Primal Religions'. Religions with no written traditions fall under this category, and are taken to be 'primal', as per modern distinctions. Huston Smith writes the following,

> We shall call their religious pattern primal because it came first, but alternatively we shall refer to it as tribal because its groupings were invariably small, or oral because writing was unknown to them. This mode of religiosity continues in Africa, Australia, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, Siberia, and among the Indians of North and South America. (Smith 1991, 367)

Generally shaped around Christian Protestant understandings of the word, the category of world-religions formed a fundamental order of academic analysis in 19th and 20th century religious studies. Chidester notes that early comparative religion "found that world religions were imperial religions" (Chidester 2014, 309). Furthermore, the distinction between world-religions and 'savage' religion necessitated different treatment of the citizens that practiced world religions, and the "ethnic, tribal, or savage subjects" that did not (Chidester 2014, 309). This divide worked towards establishing the distinction between so-called "higher races" and lower races" (Chidester 2014, 46) during the European Imperial era. As such, early religious studies discourse contributed to race-based prejudices, and the ongoing racial exclusions that followed.

This is conspicuously evident in the World's Parliament of Religions that took place as part of the gatherings of the World's Congresses of 1893. Charles Bonney, President of the 1893 World's Congresses, wrote that "with remarkable accord, the leaders of progress in all lands have recognised the World's Congresses of 1893, crowned by the Parliament of Religions, as constituting an epoch-making event in the history of human progress, marking the dawn of a new era of brotherhood and peace" (Bonney 1895, 322). Bonney's focus on the "marvellous religious progress of the nineteenth century" (Bonney 1895, 325) echoes the modern enthrallment with the European progress narrative, and tacitly maintains the shadow of the primitive and uncivilised. In his preliminary address, Bonney praises "the moral and spiritual agencies which are at the root of human progress" (Bonney 1895, 328-329) and which he argues are exemplified by "the great historic religions of the world" (Bonney 1895, 330). Writing after the first Parliament, Bonney concludes with a particularly Christianised account of the proceedings.

> In a certain high and representative sense, the Parliament of Religions was an exemplification of monism in religion. For it showed that with all the differences in the forms of religion, there is, nevertheless, something

> underlying them all, which constitutes an incorruptible and indestructible bond of brotherhood, which, like a golden cord, binds all the races of men in one grand fraternity of love and service. What that enduring something is, may be found quite explicitly set forth in the Christian Scriptures. (Bonney 1895, 323)

In many ways, this gathering set the context for the academic study of religion over the next century. Although it took place in Chicago, no Native American religious leaders were present. Missing also were any indigenous representatives from African or Afro-Caribbean religions. This erasure reflects the Imperial racism of 19th century discourse, and is in keeping with the colonial mandates of the time.

> While world religions were explored through textual translation, historical reconstruction, and philosophical reflection, savage religions were subjects for administrative intervention, ethnographic reporting, and psychological explanation… (Chidester 2014, 46)

The constructed category of world-religion pivoted on the sacred texts and doctrines of religions which emerged from "the Middle East, India, and the Far East" (Chidester 2018, 45). Indigenous religions featured in discussions of world-religions "as traces of origins and absences" (Chidester 2018, 46), unworlded and ethereal through the colonial lenses that refused to acknowledge their legitimacy on the world stage.

Critical theorist Tomoko Masuzawa writes that "the notion of separate and distinct religions of the world was integrated into European political projects in forging identities based on race, language, and territory" (Masuzawa 2005, 20). In 1895, the scramble for Africa was well underway, during which European economic concerns moved to the 'dark continent' in the wake of America's political independence. In her book *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), Masuzawa argues that the "modern discourse on religion and religions … was clearly a discourse of othering" (Masuzawa 2005, 20). She points to the process of self-definition that Europe was engaged in during the 18th and 19th centuries, and argues that the discourse on world-religion "quickly became an effective means of differentiating, variegating, consolidating and totalizing" (Masuzawa 2005, 20) the collectives that Europe encountered during her colonial era.

As the 20th century gave way to the 21st, the world-religions category itself came under fire (Masuzawa 2005; Urubshurow 2008; Chidester 2018). Scholars who critiqued the term often suggested new ways to use it. In an attempt to rework the term, Martin Palmer's *World Religions* (2005), provides an encyclopaedic overview of every tradition deemed 'religious', including those once categorised as primal. He launches a discussion of religion which "ranges from the vast arrays of indigenous religions still to be found today to the great missionary faiths such as Buddhism and Islam" (Palmer 2005, 08). The inclusion of unworlded-religions echoes the general consensus of the early 21st century regarding the need to re-structure the world-religions category. However, the metric by which Palmer chooses to structure his revision are of dubious value.

In his introduction, Palmer highlights the pivotal role of 'faith' in gaining a clear understanding of diverse religious traditions, and structures his work to allow "faith itself to determine that which is important and significant" (Palmer 2005, 08). In doing this, he attempts to open the category of world-religion. However, the focus on faith as a foundational phenomenon limits his discussion of world-religions to the Protestant onto-epistemological frame.

As Chidester notes, "the model of 'world religions' has struggled with finding terminology for indigenous religions because it is premised on their exclusion" (Chidester 2018, 46)[29]. This struggle is evident in a report published by Maoz & Henderson (2013) called *The World Religion Project,* which offers a "a systematically developed classification of major world religions" and thereby presents "a new dataset on world religions" (Maoz & Henderson 2013, 265). The criteria they use to discuss religion focuses on four domains of enquiry: scripture, institutions, historical evolution (specifically indicating the formation of institutions), and shared rituals. This fourth category allows them to include the "broad set of religions that is characterized by polytheism" (Maoz & Henderson 2013, 270). However, in some key regards this study of world-religions still disenfranchises previously unworlded religions. There are significant world-making practices that don't rely on the written word, and don't cohere

[29] Chidester also problematises this exclusion, and notes that 19th and early 20th century theory on world-religions has been "critiqued, deconstructed and abandoned" (Chidester 2012, 109). That said, the current discourse around world-religions within critical religious studies remains contested.

within systems of centralised or institutionalised power. Featuring them under the category 'shared ritual' does little to remedy the onto-epistemological erasures enacted by the modern project. Although attempting to include unworlded religions in their world dataset, Maoz & Henderson overlook the ongoing onto-epistemological erasures the world-religion paradigm supports. I will argue that a new reckoning with the term 'world-religions' is needed, one that does not try assimilate the diversity of pagan and indigenous traditions into the existing world-religion model.

To add to the ongoing discourse around the term 'world-religions', I suggest that this category is useful if it is considered to describe religious traditions that engage technologies which enable them to interface with the apparatus of state politics. Dutch theologian, Cornelius Petrus Tiele, wrote that world-religions are those traditions that develop "only in the train of, and in connexion with, a superior civilization" (Tiele 1886, 355). The association of 'world-religion' with "politically powerful traditions" (Urubushow 2008, 15) continues to be useful in current analysis. J.Z. Smith noted that world-religions are those which have "achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history, either to form it, interact with it, or to thwart it. All other religions are invisible" (Smith 1978, 295). How was this power gained? And where does the discourse on power go to when unworlded-religions are cobbled together under the world-religions category? By erasing earlier distinctions, scholars may not be remedying the situation, but instead inadvertently muddying waters that are already terribly murky. Merely including indigenous traditions under a newly formulated world-religion category does not allow for clarity around historical erasures.

For the purpose of this thesis, the *problem of religion* does not only refer to the failure of the modern secular world to secure public spaces free of religious interference. This particular problem, the one that world-religion poses to the secular nation-state, has been well documented and continues to be expressly negotiated within modern collectives. There is another problem with religion, one which is also of critical importance. I am referring to the problem caused by the successful relationship between world-religion and secular collectives, as they worked together against 'primitive' agentic practices during European colonial expansion. In this context, world-religions are those traditions that have managed to maintain

a hold on public opinion and private property in such a way that they were grandfathered into nation-states at the very inception of the secular political process[30].

Graham Harvey notes that the ideologies of European theology and Cartesian rationalism "are not different things" but form part of a mutual dualism that constitutes the modern project (Harvey 2013, 38). World-religion structures in Europe, together with the secular structures of nation-states, have been locked in the intimacy of dichotomous relations, and did more than merely oppose one another. They also colluded to manage and maintain the colonial project. This project involves an explicit and ongoing unworlding of indigenous peoples.

With the mattering of modern culture so deeply entangled in the written word, those collectives who do not attach to writing as a form of intrinsic verification are othered. In this regard, world-religion as a category joins forces with the secular to erase nonmodern worlds. In the dialectic between religion and modernity, the nonmodern is relegated to an invisible position. Made abyssal by world-religion traditions working alongside and within modern secular spaces, indigenous practices continue to occupy the side-lines in terms of academic theory making, while still making up a large portion of ongoing global practices. World-religions and secular states "form a nonexclusive dynamic, or a symbiosis" (Merz & Merz 2017, 07), which continues to occlude nonmodern collectives. Othered by this symbiosis, the collectives on the abyssal side of the line, and their world-making technologies, are continuously overlooked.

[30] This is not to say that those traditions that 'make the grade' as world-religion are easily homogenised under this category. Various scholars have called attention to the underlying Protestant hegemony that shapes the discourse on world-religion. For instance, although Islam and Hinduism are both understood to be world-religions due to their political coherence and reliance on sacred texts, these disparate traditions are not conceptually on the same ground as Christianity. The framing of various nonChristian religions under the world-religion banner happened under the jurisdiction of Protestant theologians, and renders invisible a set of socio-political, and onto-epistemological realities. While the world-religion category continues to be useful in as much as it frames certain kinds of politic-religious practice, the various traditions counted within this rubric remain diverse, and are not easily homogenised.

3.2.3. Constructing the Third Position

My analysis in this chapter owes a large debt to Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004), the French philosopher who introduced deconstruction as a critical method, and helped fuel the postmodern turn in the 20th century. Derrida wrote on ways that modern conceptual dichotomies could be interrupted and interrogated. Deconstruction as a form of critical analysis has been pivotal to the emancipatory projects undertaken by religious studies scholars. By focusing on deconstruction as a significant vector of engagement, Derrida provided conceptual apparatus with which to disrupt modern political and social hegemonies.

> Wherever I have followed this investigative approach, it has been a question of showing that the system does not work, and that this dysfunction not only interrupts the system but itself accounts for the desire for system, which draws its *elan* from this very disadjoinment, or disjunction. On each occasion, the disjunction has a privileged site in that which one calls a philosophical corpus. Basically, deconstruction as I see it is an attempt to train the beam of analysis onto this disjointing link. (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 04)

By applying deconstructive methods to the modern systems he investigated, Derrida endeavoured to "account for the subterranean region in which the system constitutes itself by repressing that which makes it possible…" (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 4-5). One of the most important conceptual tools that emerges in Derrida's work during the process of deconstruction, is the salience of the 'third term'.

> …in the end every thing we have said about the system comes down to a question of the 'third'. This third term can be taken as the mediator that permits synthesis, reconciliation, participation; in which case that which is neither this nor that permits the synthesis of this and that. (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 05)

For Derrida, looking for the third position within modern binaries was an essential tool for designating "the place where the system does not close" (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 05). By locating a third position from which to critique modern dualism, Derrida pointed out that the dichotomous system constitutes itself through the third position, while simultaneously being

threatened by it (Derrida & Ferraris 2001, 05). As such, the third position is both essential to the initial dichotomy, and disruptive of it[31].

Reading this important methodological intervention into my thesis allows for my discussion of indigenous religion to retain its critical imperative. Beside the modern dualism of religion and secular politics stands a third-position that is currently circumscribed by the drawing of an abyssal line through the becoming of the world. Boaventura de Sousa Santos notes this separation, and argues that "science, philosophy and theology" fall on one side of the divide, while "knowledges rendered incommensurable and incomprehensible for meeting neither the scientific methods of truth nor their acknowledged contesters in the realm of philosophy and theology" (de Sousa Santos 2007, 04) fall on the other. His unusual grouping of science and theology in a category that together defines the abyssal limit helps to shine a spotlight on the formation of the third-position. For the nonmodern as a nonsecular position to be integrated into the critical study of religion, a grappling with the modern construction of 'ontology' is needed.

3.3. Ontological Matters

As discussed in previous chapters, modern onto-epistemological limits constitute a radical reduction of the relational world. Neither the internal and once-divine *cogito* nor the external world of 'soulless' material are constructs that hold from the nonmodern perspective.

There are important developments in anthropology which provide conceptual apparatus for moving beyond modern onto-epistemological limits. The 'ontological turn' within anthropological scholarship might be valuable in moving the critical material study of religion towards the non-secular, while still maintaining the non-theological nature of his work. By questioning the ontological limits established within the modern academic project, the long debated notion of *animism* comes once again to the fore. Current critical discourse on animism is structured by secular commitments, and leave no place for non-secular theories and practices. This is problematic for a discipline that presents itself as moving beyond modern and colonial hegemonies.

[31] This is similar only in name to Hegel's notion of the third position, which allows for the integration of the dialectic, and therefore only reinscribes modern prerogatives. Derrida works to transgress the dialectic.

3.3.1. The Matter of Animism

Edward Tylor, who made popular the notion of animism in the late 19th century, intended for this term to explain 'primitive societies' within which matter was believed to be animated by external spirits that 'infused' dead material objects. In Tylor's understanding, the animistic view of nature characterised "tribes very low in the scale of humanity" (Tylor 1871, 426), as well as the "spiritualism" (Tylor 1920 [1871], 144) of 19th century Europe. He opined that the animism of the "lower races" (Tylor 1920 [1871], 23) was the ancient progenitor of the more developed world-religions, placing these collectives as an anachronistic holdover from the past. He describes animism thusly:

> An idea of pervading life and will in nature far outside modern limits, a belief in personal souls animating even what we call inanimate bodies, a theory of transmigration of souls as well in life as after death; a sense of crowds of spiritual beings sometimes flitting through the air, but sometimes also inhabiting trees and rocks and waterfalls, and so lending their own personality to such material objects. (Tylor 1920 [1871], 287).

Tylor's discussion of animism relies on "the Cartesian lens" that separates matter from mind, and therefore coheres within a dualistic version of the world (Bailey 2009, 42). In the early 20th century, Emile Durkheim read a more nuanced version of animism into the study of religion. He rejected Tylor's argument that primitive mentality could not distinguish between animate and inanimate objects (Durkheim 1915, 54). Instead, he suggested that "primitive peoples" extended "bonds of friendship" to nonhuman agents, and negotiated these bonds through forms of "interdependence" (Durkheim 1915, 139 in Bird-Nuit 1999, 70). He rejects Tylor's theory of animism as the basis for early religious developments and insists that animistic practice is "too universally abandoned today to demand that we stop any longer for it" (Durkheim 1915, 53). Although his insight into the 'interdependence' and 'friendship' between humans and nonhumans provides a rich ground for further analysis, he abandons further examination of these forms of relation. He concludes his discussion of animism by arguing that "animists pretend to construct the idea of sacred beings out of the sensations evoked in us by different phenomena of the physical or biological order" (Durkheim 1915, 224). This turn to a biological basis for animist practice motivates the later 20th century *cognitive* theories of religion.

Cognitive scientists Thomas Lawson & Robert McCauley argued that the human mind is structured by "idealized cognitive models" that underly the "conceptual systems" (Lawson & McCauley 1990, 155) of religion. The cognitive explanation for religious sentiments replaces the category of animism with what Justin Barret calls the "*hypersensitive agency detection device",* a cognitive proclivity that is responsible for "human perceptual and conceptual tendency to see human-like agents and agency everywhere" (Barret 2011, 100). Timothy Ketelaar sums up the cognitive explanation of religion as follows.

> Religion is essentially a by-product of an evolved bias toward over-attributing agency as the source of unexplained events (e.g., what was that noise in the bush?). A key feature ... is the claim that this bias emerges from the simple evolutionary factor that the recurrent challenge of detecting predators and other dangerous agents can be characterized as a signal-detection problem ... in which a miss would have been far less costly than a false alarm. (Ketelaar 2004, 740)

This perspective presents animism as a failed epistemology (Bird-David 1999, 69), and "downgrades indigenous cognitive ability" (Bird-David 1999, 71) in ways that are becoming unacceptable in the 21st century. As Harry Garuba notes, forms of practice categorised as animist are "mediated by meaning" (Garuba 2003, 279). When these world-making practices are enacted, the web of relations that comes to the fore renders "the animate–inanimate distinction" devoid of meaning (Rountree 2012, 308).

Already in the mid 20th century, Irvine Hallowell had coined the phrase "other than human persons" (Hallowell 1960, 53), which led to ongoing discourse on the 'new animism' as the century drew to a close. In the academic discussions that followed from Hallowell's contributions, "persons" were reconceived as "related beings constituted by their many and various interactions with others" (Harvey 2005, 18). Harvey did not consider attribution of personhood to spirits and natural objects to be a cognitive mistake. Within the 'new animism', the animist becomes someone who engages multiple forms of personhood through *relation*, not through error.

Anthropologist Martin Mills, notes that "to treat an object or set of behaviours as a person, after all, is not to conclude that it is a specific kind of object or kind of behaviour, but to treat

it as something qualitatively different" (Mills 2013, 30). This in keeping with the African indigenous approach to personhood, in which animist practice can be understood as "a nondoctrinaire mould of constant awareness" (Soyinka 1976, 54). Garuba describes this "spirit of constant awareness" as functioning "on a logic of inclusion rather than exclusion" with an assimilative reach beyond modern binaries (Garuba 2003, 272).

Florencia Tola presents a study of the Toba collectives of the Argentinean Chaco. She discusses the Toba relations with "entities, that, although not human, possess an intentionality capable of directing and exerting actions on the world and on human beings" (Tola 2014, 71). These invisible agents "coexist with past and present humans" and "this coexistence is perceived through the effects that they produce in space, in human bodies, and in human subjectivity" (Tola 2014, 71). They are known as *shiyaxaua* (roughly translated as *person*) and are said to have "their own point of view on the world, attributes of social life, agency, and corporal aptitudes that allow cognition and emotions" (Tola 2014, 76). The agential dynamics of nonhuman persons matter in very significant ways within Toba collectives.

As Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe so aptly puts it, "Wherever Something stands, Something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute" (Achebe 1965, 61). Within a world constituted by relations, meanings emerge from sites of "interaction and exchange" (Garuba 2003, 279). In this world-making schema, the "dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations" (Ingold 2006, 10) is responsible for the continual and reciprocal processes that bring agents into being.

> Animacy, then, is not a property of persons imaginatively projected onto the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather ... it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. (Ingold 2006, 10)

As such, within indigenous collectives the ability to act in relational ways is what *comprises a person*. Rather than locating personhood in autonomous and unchanging structures, people are continually generated through practice. With a relational ontology, multiple dynamic relations constitute the self (Davey & Quilley 2018, 387). Philosopher Andrew Benjamin

suggests that within relational ontologies, "existence is a weave of relations in which singularities are after-effects" (Benjamin 2015, 18). From this shift in onto-epistemological positioning, 21st century anthropologists have worked to recast the modern discourse around animism. No longer understood as misattributions of personhood, the animist rather perceives "a world of relations instead of one divided into persons and objects" (Davey & Quilley 2018, 392). With nonhuman agents counting as relational persons, there is an onto-epistemological accounting to be made. However, as contemporary scholars work towards building the conceptual apparatus for examining animism as a relational ontology, the modern split between ontology and epistemology becomes a barrier to further theorising.

Relation in modern discourse has become a catchall phrase for any form of meeting between separate entities. Couched in this language, relation is the fuzzy glue that binds autonomous objects and/or subjects together, in a world where becoming is cut into distinct pieces by exclusive humanist and Cartesian mores. Within modern discourse, relation first implies separation, before it points to the coming together of separate interests.

However, if relation is primary to material existence, if "things—actual entities—are multiplicities, assemblages, hybrids, resonance machines, sonority clusters, intra-actions, complexities, and viscous porosities" (Keller and Rubenstein 2017, 02) then academic focus perforce moves beyond the strict boundaries of Enlightenment reason, and towards the open systems of complex relational becoming that make up the worlds of nonmodern collectives. This work is already underway. As the 21st century progresses, anthropological scholars are labouring to produce invisible agents as material within the purview of the academy, by engaging an 'ontological turn' which promises new avenues for study.

3.3.2. The Matter of Ontology

Anthropologists Miguel Astor-Aguilera and Graham Harvey note that efforts to understand how "nonWestern peoples perceive and relate" are generally inadequate and impose a "Cartesian analytical mode of polar binary thinking" on collectives who do not construct the world along Cartesian lines (Astor-Aguilera and Harvey 2018, 03). Both Aguilera and Harvey suggest that the current interest in alternate ontologies within anthropological discourse provides "a new mode of engaging, comprehending and analysing cultural differences both temporally and spatially" (Astor-Aguilera and Harvey 2018, 03). This so-called ontological turn has sparked ongoing debates around historical understandings of animism.

First introduced by anthropologist Viveiros de Castro, who formulated this approach during his work with Amerindian cosmologies, the ontological turn within anthropology coincides with both new materialist and posthuman theory (Henare et al., 2007).

> This idea, of not assuming a division between the natural and the social, the ideal and the material, is a key plank of the ontological turn's platform. Hence its name: from epistemology and a concern with ideas, worldviews, and cultures, to ontology, and a recognition of the importance of nature and being. (Heywood 2017, 04)

Heywood argues that the ontological turn is not making "explicit claims" about the nature of reality, but rather devising a new set of heuristics that do away with the notion of 'belief' in favour of granting validity to the different ontologies that shape nonmodern collectives (Heywood 2017, 07).

Viveiros de Castro's formulation of this new ontological focus brings attention to the idea of multiple ontologies that can be understood through the application of a singular anthropological epistemology. He called this 'multinaturalism' as opposed to 'multiculturalism' (de Castro 2004, 478). In de Castro's view, the object seen by the anthropologist as inert, and seen by an indigenous person as "imbued with a spirit" are *two different things*, emerging from two different ontologies (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 178). These claims, which radically disrupt the modern notion of a universal ontology, have opened proponents of the ontological turn to many different critiques.

Primarily, critics of the ontological turn are concerned with the ways in which diverging ontologies might be mapped and made sense of. As Bessire and Bond note, "the pertinent questions of how difference comes to matter and what kinds of difference are allowed to matter are pointedly left unaddressed" (Bessire & Bond 2014, 442). With difference understood as being "between worlds and not worldviews" (Heywood 2012, 143), critics are left questioning whether this approach further reifies the distinctions between modern and nonmodern collectives (Bessire & Bond 2014, 442). David Graeber argues that the ontological turn is equal to "classical philosophical Idealism" in which "ideas generate realities" (Graeber 2015, 21). Eldar Bråten suggests that from a realist viewpoint, ontological anthropology results in the "most extreme manifestation possible of commitment to the epistemological"

(Bråten 2022, 204). These critics are not willing to collapse ontology and epistemology into a single world-making practice (Bråten 2022, 202). By remaining committed to the distinction between the epistemological and the ontological domains, critics of the ontological turn suppose that this new development in anthropology privileges mind above matter, and renders 'thoughts' into 'things' (Bråten 2022, 204). I will argue that realist critics fail to take into account the material nature of relationality. Relations are not simply conceptual, they are sensual, pragmatic and self-generating. The worry that 'mind' overtakes 'matter' in the ontological turn is premised on a obstinate commitment to Cartesian distinctions.

That said, de Castro's argument that there are many different ontological worlds might also be missing the point of how post-Cartesian things come to matter. When the making of the world is understood as an onto-epistemological process, the distinctions between how things are perceived does not rest on the incommensurability of differing ontologies, but the limits of different *relational* modes. Through relation and material resonance, different ontologies refract through and into one another. The result is not fundamentally distinct ontological worlds, but multiple worlds entangled in, and emerging through, relation. Along these same lines, when I use the term world-making I am not referring to the making of definitely separate ontological structures, but rather pointing to the incomplete process of becoming from which all ontologies emerge. The making of the world is a practical process, involving continual material relations between world-makers.

To answer critics worries about how difference comes to matter across purportedly differing ontologies, I would suggest moving the focus to the dynamics of material relation, and applying Chidester's lenses of material analysis. What material categories are relevant when considering the stone from the anthropologists point of view, and from the indigenous persons point of view? What formations, circulations and absences can be tracked in the material relations that comprise two different onto-epistemological approaches to the making of the world?

Another criticism that has been levelled against proponents of the ontological turn, and Graham Harvey in particular, is that his discussion of animism is in fact a theological discussion, and should therefore have no place within the secular academy. James Cox labels Harvey's contribution as a form of "animist theology" which identifies Harvey as a "believer" and an animist himself. According to Cox, Harvey presents claims about "postulated non-

falsifiable alternate realities" that cannot be confirmed by the scientific process (Cox 2007, 162). As such, Cox reject's Harvey's work, as well as Harvey's critical deconstruction of the "Enlightenment project" (Cox 2007, 167). In presenting his critique of Harvey, Cox leans on his own identity as an atheist to undermine the work of 'believers' in the academic study of religion. In this regard, Cox betrays his ideological stance as a modern, secular humanist. As Latour has noted, moderns are those people who believe that others believe. Cox's beliefs about animism continue to bolster the abyssal line in the academic study of religion, and makes visible the gatekeeping function of the secular stance. If, as Graham Harvey suggests, indigenous collectives "recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey 2006, xi), how can scholars of religion begin to map these material practices?

Reciprocal forms of relation do not rely on beliefs, and are not merely conceptual. Instead, they are evidence of situated-knowledge, and the making of the world through pragmatic engagements with the relational fecundity of material becoming. This onto-epistemological reality is denied by scholars who are committed to the closures inherent in the secular frame. The metaphysical debate around the validity of disparate ontological understandings can be entirely circumvented if Chidester's approach is applied to the notion of animism and relational ontology. Things and people come to matter through the pragmatic and reciprocal relations that they engage, which can be empirically and critically measured by attending to their historical categories, followed by tracing the formations, circulations and absences that emerge when considering relation as a material process.

3.4. Nonmodern Matters

I have argued that the third-position coheres around collectives who have a significant onto-epistemological engagements with the world in common. The nonmodern is neither secular nor religious in the ways of world-religions. Through European imperialism it has been designated as oppositional to both of these modern constructs. It includes onto-epistemological practices that have been rejected by established world-religions and which are overlooked by secular interests. As the third-position beside world-religions and the secular, the nonmodern is comprised of world-making practices that disrupt and disable modern closures.

The ways in which the nonmodern comes to matter are myriad. It comes to matter through its conspicuous material absence in key domains. It also comes to matter through its generative presence, the ways that it offers for engaging the world, and the technologies it generates for coherent world-making. The salience of these technologies have been overlooked by modern scholars who attempt a secular reckoning of these practices. Technologies based in porous relationality are substantially different from modern buffered technologies, and are eclipsed by ongoing reliance on secular onto-epistemologies. To remedy this, it becomes important to enquire into the generative and affirmative ways in which the nonmodern makes the world.

Turning to the language that Charles Taylor introduced in his discussion of secularity, nonmodern collectives display various modes of porosity that are missing or eclipsed within modern spaces. Secular commitments currently define the 'real' within religious studies discourse. In this way, secular mandates decide what *matters* in the study of religion. Putting aside the secular hegemony of the 'real', the ways in which nonhuman and invisible persons come to matter require closer attention.

A brief discussion of nonmodern world-making technologies provides insight into the alternative strategies offered by third-position collectives. These technologies of mattering are neither religious nor secular, yet they present a comprehensive domain of activity that resonates around the globe. The relational intimacy of verbal knowledge transmission, the intricate dynamics of embodied relations, and the congenial efficacy of reciprocal engagements with other-than-human persons, are abyssal technologies that separate nonmodern practices from world-religion, as well as from secular practice. These porous technologies of mattering, which generate and allow for relations with multiple nonhuman others, remain under-theorised within the domain of religious studies. In common across a range of nonmodern collectives, I will argue that porous agentic relations with other-than-human and invisible persons is what ultimately renders this domain abyssal in the view of modern scholars.

3.4.1. Porous Matters

Tim Ingold notes that through the buffering process of modern secularism, "beings originally open to the world are closed in upon themselves, sealed by an outer boundary or shell that protects their inner constitution from the traffic of interactions with their surroundings"

(Ingold 2006, 11). In this regard, the buffer, considered as the opposite of and superior to porosity, is what characterises modern world-making practices. In the late 19th century Tylor wrote that "to the minds of the lower races it seems that all nature is possessed, pervaded, crowded, with spiritual beings" (Tylor 1920 [1871], 271). He laments that 'primitive' practice takes shape "far outside modern limits" and results in "crowds of spiritual beings sometimes flitting through the air, but sometimes also inhabiting trees and rocks and waterfalls" (Tylor 1920 [1871], 287). The porous relationality displayed within these collectives was cause for Tylor to assign them lower status within Europe's civilizational schema. This kind of porosity continues to be antithetical to the modern position (Ingold 2006, 18).

Modern scholarship intends to know the world by grasping it "within a grid of concepts and categories" (Ingold 2006, 18), steering clear of relational openings. While the nonmodern is constituted in relationality, relationally generated knowledge is often dismissed as insubstantial within the secular academy (Harvey 2013, 38). What worlds are critical scholars of religion attending to? What would a more porous religious studies look like?

Latour's focus on the domain of the nonmodern at the end of the 20th century offers a significant contribution to the ongoing labour of de-colonising the contemporary academy. However, in the three decades since Latour published his thoughts on nonmodern collectives, the term itself has not gained much traction. This arguably reflects an ongoing tacit agreement between European Christianity and modern secular-state frameworks. Together, they form an exclusive system against which the nonmodern is articulated primarily through erasure. The makers of modern Europe dichotomised religion and secular-state formation, but at the same time, and particularly through the colonial project, religion and the secular also formed a "nonexclusive dynamic, or a symbiosis" (Merz & Merz 2017, 07) that relegated nonmodern world-making practices to the abyss.

3.4.2. Real Matters

Sohail Inayatullah writes that "the real has come about for various reasons" and involves the ongoing "silencing of various ways of thinking, of doing, and a realisation of other ways of thinking" (Inayatullah 1990, 129). After wresting onto-epistemological control back from the Catholic Church, secular thinkers in Europe locked down new limits and definitions regarding what exists, and what is allowed to matter. Part of this process involved a definitive separation between the human 'body' and the human 'mind', which allowed modern thinkers

to buffer themselves against the relational world of which they were part. As discussed previously, this buffer was strengthened by the conceptual apparatus of *belief*, a word that encapsulates and diminishes human relations with other-than-human and invisible agents.

Francis Nyamnjoh problematises the gatekeeping function around the 'real' that western discourse has initiated. The secular academy recognises "individuals and nation states as *real*" (Nyamnjoh 2001, emphasis in original), but overlooks the "endless possibilities of being and becoming" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 256) that characterise relational agency beyond secular boundaries. He notes that from the point of view of African lived experience, "the real is not only what is observable or what makes cognitive sense; it is also the invisible, the emotional, the sentimental, the intuitive and the inexplicable" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 258). Within indigenous African collective spaces, the real is what matters to the case at hand. Valentin-Yves Mudimbe in his book *The Invention of Africa* (1998), laments the "epistemological ethnocentrism" (Mudimbe 1998, 28) that results in a "silent dependence on a Western episteme" (Mudimbe 1998, 10). The material relevance of invisible agency and emotional relation is lost when secular mandates on the 'real' hold hegemony.

Harry Garuba, in an article entitled "Explorations in Animist Materialism" (2003) discusses what he calls the "re-enchantment of the world," by which he attempts to destabilise Weber's theory of rationalisation. For Weber, rationalisation allows for 'disenchantment', which corresponds to the displacement of "magical elements of thought" (Gerth and Mills 1991, 51). In opposition to this, Garuba expounds the "magical" worldview within African society, in within which "new developments in science, technology, and the organization of the world" are assimilated (Garuba 2003, 267). The process of magical rationalisation possesses "real effects" and exerts a material influence (Garuba 2003, 268). How can the critical study of religion account for the aspects of indigenous and pagan discourse that centre around the "coming-into-being of a manifestly complex reality" (Soyinka 1976, 53)? Considering that critical thinking cleaves a linear theory of rational development, is it even possible to account for the fecund material/creative capacity of alternate world-making systems within critical discourse?

Furthermore, what does it mean for a critical and non-theological study of religion, if "the really "real" is neither produced nor found but often *equivalent* to or fathomable *through*" lived experience? (Blanes & Espírito Santo 2014, 26). The "narrow idea of reality characterised

by dualisms and the primacy of the mind" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 259) does not hold when encountering nonmodern practices. Often the real/nonreal distinction privileges European values, and continues the process of race-based erasure that has come to characterise modern world-making practices.

As long as "the secular" is presented as "the real" (Josephson-Storm 2018, 16) within the critical study of religion, this discourse is bound to "produce doppelgangers—one marked as actual and the other as phantasm" (Josephson-Storm 2018, 16). Nyamnjoh writes that "if civilisation means confinement to a narrow idea of reality characterised by dualisms" then multiple contemporary collectives have reason to "disabuse themselves of civilisation and modernity" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 259). The modernity that still cleaves to Cartesian mores, and that produces the secular as a necessity for humanist progress, also produces "severed, dismembered, scarred, caricatured or savaged" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 259) versions of nonmodern becomings.

Anthropological scholarship that engages the ontological turn recognises the hegemonic realist position taken by earlier researchers. Anthropologists Espírito Santo & Hunter, in their book *Mattering the Invisible* (2021) suggest that there is no "real world" in contrast to the imaginary or "enchanted" world of others. Instead, they note that "*worlds* are performed and enacted through different forms of relationality and thus *become* real" (Espírito Santo & Hunter 2021, 03 [emphasis in original]). Things that are made real through relation "are not thought knowledges but rather lived knowledges" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 02). Experiential epistemologies embody reality, rather than appropriating it (de Sousa Santos 2018, 03). In nonmodern domains, this form of world-making orients around "the needs, desires and purposes" of both human and nonhuman persons, who are "reciprocally interdependent" (Harvey 2013, 50)**.** Indigenous African collectives experience agency as "available and affordable to humans as singular, plural and composite beings – whole or dis(re)membered – and in human or nonhuman forms, apparent or virtual, tangible and intangible alike" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04). This interdependence is particularly disruptive of the modern project.

What is made real in relation, and how can the critical study of religion accommodate the expansion of the ontological horizon that relationality necessitates? While "knowing must be reconnected with being, epistemology with ontology, thought with life" (Ingold 2006, 19) what does this mean for the critical study of religion as a secular project? If nonmodern

people are not “misattributing personhood to things” but rather engaging “a world of relations” (Davey & Quilley 2018, 392), then undefended secular commitments within the religious studies academy need to be revised.

Understanding “how realities are produced” (Lorencova et al. 2018, 03) requires a willingness to relinquish the secular hegemony on ‘actual’ reality versus the ‘imagined’ reality of nonsecular others. Modern collectives attain order “through an emphasis on the motion of indivisible parts subject to mathematical laws and the rejection of unpredictable animistic sources of change” (Merchant 1980, 425). This “secularized world” (Merchant 1980, 425) intentionally resists the relationality that characterises nonmodern becomings. When Descartes split the world into two definitive halves, he penned the dictum *cogito ergo sum*, or “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes 2006 [1637], 73). However, within nonmodern spaces, the dictum that shapes the making of the world is more like “we relate, and therefore we are” (Harvey 2013, 39). As Graham Harvey notes, this form of world-making is cohered through interactions, and involves reciprocal relations between multiple forms of agential personhood. For scholars to come to terms with these world-making practices, they will need to move beyond both “objective reasoning and theological assumption” (Harvey 2013, 42), allowing the nonmodern to matter as an important domain of enquiry.

Once the nonmodern is allowed to matter, and a material analysis of its absence is conducted, the study of religion opens up to a global discourse that transcends the limits of European history. The nonmodern provides a domain that is neither theological nor secular. With the third-position in better focus, questions around agency and relation become foundational to the continued enquiry. Aspects of relational world-making deemed deviant or entirely absent from mattering can rise to the fore.

3.4.3. The Embodied Word

With nonhuman persons either erased or reduced to things “in a literal objectification of the world”, salient relations can only occur between “separate objects in a fully determined world” (Davy & Quilley 2018, 398). Beginning in Roman Catholic Europe, the ratification of agents and relations through written contracts, and the centralising of Imperial authority through these contracts, was inherited by Enlightenment Europe, and codified into secular practice.

What becomes of other-than-modern practices that generally lack a “central authority” and produce “no universally recognized texts” (Walls 1987, 250)? Within the nonmodern domain, neither the authority of writing, nor the power of centralised oversight is foregrounded. Instead, ongoing reciprocal relationality shapes the space. Within this relational process, the technology of oral transmission allows for the sharing of embodied experience in the process of generating knowledge.

Claiming for the nonmodern what was once thought primitive, verbal information transmission (and the networked, non-centralised forms of authority that come with it) becomes an indicator of generative nonmodern world-making practice. It is the body that verbalises. The spoken word resonates through the body in which it originates, and reaches out to move all bodies that are within range. As such, oral transmission of information is an inherently embodied form of relation. Bodies resonate together through the spoken word.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that “the epistemologies of the North favor written knowledge” because writing confers “fixity or stability and permanence” which acts to “stabilize the conditions and criteria” (de Sousa Santos 2018, 185) of modern thinking. He also notes that nonmodern knowledges “are not written or recorded but expressed through what they make happen in the world and their interpretations of it” (de Sousa Santos 2018, 196). In this regard, the nonmodern domain is positively characterised by its lack of reliance on the written word. Writing can be viewed as a form of buffer against ongoing relationality – it stays still, stays the same, can be controlled, and can be erased. It does not move the body, but requires a rational decoding, available only to those who have learned the code.

Concepts, thoughts and ideas that are reified in the act of writing are made to matter in a way that is distinctive in the modern world, and characteristic of both world-religion and world-politics. In Europe, both the secular state and Christianity as world-religion cohered around written texts. Secularism can be considered as a process that links “religion to the nation” (Asad 2018, 22) through these shared technologies. Relations between world-religion and the nation-state are translated into regulations through the process of writing, and ratified by centralised authorities on both sides. Within the modern academy, there is an assumption that “those who write and who put their knowledge down in texts have something more valuable to offer than those who simply live their knowledge and use it to inform their lives” (Ahmed 1999, 128-129). Indigenous knowledges remain “largely silent and invisible in

scholarly circles" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 29), as they do not cohere around the codification of marks on paper, but the embodied resonance of the spoken word.

I have argued that relational porosity characterises the nonmodern as a third-position beside that of world-religion and secular reason. This domain of world-making challenges the secular hold on the 'real', and well as the theologically motivated notion of 'belief'. The coming to matter of invisible agents is possible within nonmodern spaces through the reciprocal relations that structure this space, and the embodied knowledges that verify relational processes. With the mattering of the nonmodern established, the way beyond both Christian theology and Eurocentric secularism opens for scholarly enquiry. Critical scholars of religion can engage an analysis of nonmodern matters, and the invisible agents that cohere within nonmodern collectives, through the application of a material methodology that rests on Chidester's approach, within a frame that is widened by the ontological turn, and informed by the material collapse of the ontology-epistemology dichotomy.

That said, furnishing critical scholars with the conceptual apparatus needed to move beyond the secular, and to allow for the mattering of the nonmodern, is only the first step towards a critically inclusive study of religion. What is needed next is an engagement with the values and motivations that cohere within nonmodern practice. Without these, the critical study of religion remains apart from the nonmodern domain, and is only able to engage an analysis of the nonmodern through the values generated on the metropolitan side of the line. In order to formulate a non-theological and non-secular approach to the study of religion, it is not enough to simply allow for the mattering of the nonmodern. The intrinsic motivations that shape this space need to rise to the level of materiality too. As a step towards this, I turn to the domain of indigenous African folktales, as told by Amos Tutuola, and analysed through the lenses supplied by African sociologist Francis Nyamnjoh. Through this, I hope to provide flesh for the bones that make up the theories I have been knitting together so far.

3.5. Modern Exclusions

I have argued that both Christian theology and secular reason underly abyssal exclusions that limit scholars from engaging substantially with nonmodern onto-epistemologies. In order to make these abyssal exclusions more visible, I will discuss the onto-epistemological differences between African and European collectives that have been obscured with the introduction of the terms 'nature' and 'culture'. African people were once classed as 'beastlike' products of

nature, alongside animals, which saw them denied the basic human rights afforded to European citizens. Later they were allowed standing as primitive persons who were distinct from European persons due to their engagement with 'primitive culture'. The Eurocentric construct of culture, along with the written records of 'customs', designated certain indigenous practices as tolerable, and erased others.

The customary laws introduced to allow for colonial oversight of the indigenous population reduced African world-making practices to proportions considered acceptable by European colonisers. I will argue that both nature and culture, as Eurocentric constructs, have been pivotal in the oppression of African indigeneity. Neither nature nor culture can account for the holistic and relational world-making practices that comprise African indigenous positions, and the hegemonic use of 'natureculture' to describe the whole of reality needs critical deconstruction.

To further engage this argument, I will discuss the formation of nature and culture as modern categories, and the ways in which these material formations exclude the onto-epistemological mattering of relation. Although the contemporary academy no longer insists on a dichotomy between nature and culture, the proposed natureculture continuum is still problematic. By combining nature and culture into a complex system, critical scholars have allowed for the deconstruction of this modern duality. However, as the natureculture continuum does not extend past the modern limits of either nature or culture, this continuum continues to ensure the absence and erasure of alternate onto-epistemologies within academic discourse.

3.5.1. The Making of Nature and Culture

Nature as a separate and distinct aspect of the world, beside the rational human subject, came to matter in the process of the "death of nature" (Merchant 1980, 423) that accompanied the European Enlightenment. Inspired by Descartes' distinction between the physical world (*res extensa*) and the rational human soul (*res cogita*), nature as object was invented and summarily given a death sentence as the modern project progressed. Caroline Merchant, American ecofeminist philosopher and historian of science, notes in *The Death of Nature* (1980) that Descartes' "machinelike" version of the human body replaced "the concept of the self as an integral part of a close-knit harmony of organic parts united to the cosmos and society" (Merchant 1980, 423). She notes further that this Cartesian split

"rendered nature effectively dead, inert, and manipulated from without" (Merchant 1980, 423). With the death of nature, the natural world was depersonalised and made into an object to be dominated.

In Descartes' view, animals as extensions of nature could also be viewed as depersonalised objects, to be conquered and possessed by humans. This modern view set the tone for colonial atrocities as Europe expanded into Africa, where indigenous collectives were considered to be "indistinguishable" from beasts, and therefore possessing no rational soul (Chidester 1996, 14). As Chidester notes, in as much as animals "had no human rights to land or life" neither did indigenous Africans (Chidester 1996, 14). Sometimes considered to be "worse than beasts" (Chidester 1996, 14), both animals and 'primitives' were viewed as bodies-without-will (Johnson 2014, 04), and therefore as objects that could be conquered and possessed. This racist thinking impacted the ways in which colonial interlopers engaged with indigenous Africans, and "underlay settler justifications for their dispossession" (Adhikari 2010, 21). By reducing the natural world to soulless objects, the Cartesian distinction fuelled colonial thinking, instigating colonial mistreatment of Africans who were considered less-than-human, and therefore as objects to be owned. In this regard, the making of nature functioned as a violent device of othering and erasure. It's supposed opposite, the realm of culture, has functioned in much the same way.

The comparative study of culture, in the form of cultural anthropology, rose to prominence in the late 19th century. Emerging as a direct product of colonialism, the need to catalogue various non-European world-making practices necessitated the fast-growing discipline. Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1871) exemplified this academic construction, and helped to formulate notions of cultural hegemony in terms of Europe's relations with global others. Taking inspiration from Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), Tylor described the various cultures of the world in terms of their inferiority to what he considered the more highly evolved European model. By classing African culture as a remnant of pre-historic forms of world-making, he presented a view in which African onto-epistemologies had no material value apart from shedding light on Europe's ancient past. I will argue that the category of culture, and the hegemonic application of this category during the height of the colonial era, contributed directly to the oppression of indigenous Africans.

Tylor's contribution also had a direct impact on the study of religion. He writes that "nowhere, perhaps, are broad views of historical development more needed than in the study of religion" (Tylor 1920 [1871], 37). He built an argument that placed indigenous religious practices on the lowest rung of cultural evolution, and European Christianity as the final and perfect product of higher cultural development. One of the deciding factors in Tylor's argument was the lack of written records within indigenous communities.

> The lower races, wanting documentary memorials, loose in preserving tradition, and ever ready to clothe myth in its shape, can seldom be trusted in their stories of long-past ages. (Tylor 1920 [1871], 54)

Tylor wholly overlooked the inherent values of oral transmission of knowledge, and the kind of knowledges it makes present in the world. During the colonial era, the process of writing was an "active epistemic intervention" that presented itself as a "neutral restatement" but selected only the forms of knowledge that writers deemed "worthy of being stored" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 197). As a tool of oppression, writing *produced* knowledge "under the guise of storing it" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 197). When European colonists arrived on the African continent, one of their primary measures of control came through their insistence on creating written records of African world-making practices. These records became textual interfaces for applying European law in indigenous spaces, and involved a violent form of onto-epistemicide in the name of secularised legislation. As such, written records in colonial spaces were often an exercise of power, and played an important role in the onto-epistemicide visited on African collectives.

For example, the written legislation introduced by British authorities to provide structure for indirect rule de-materialises and erases some fundamental aspects of African world-making. One of these acts of legislation was a document called the *Natal Code of Native Law* (1891). This body of laws was created to separate the laws applied to African indigenous peoples from the laws that were applied to European colonists, while also placing the resulting 'native law' as inferior to European law.

In addition to constructing African practices as secondary to European practices, by legally formalising the dynamic worlds of the peoples they had conquered, colonial authorities captured living traditions and reified them in the written word. This had a disastrous effect

on the world-making practices around which African collectives cohered. Customary laws were constructed through the truncating gaze of modern onto-epistemology. In the process, only some African world-making practices were preserved on the non-abyssal side of the line, and even then, they had been grossly disfigured by the crossing.

As a vivid example of the abyssal line being drawn in European relations with Africa, the practices that made it into the official customary law documents were those that were not considered "repugnant" to the "general principles of humanity observed throughout the civilized world."[32] The word 'repugnant' means that which is extremely distasteful or unacceptable. The repugnancy clause was written into effect in the Natal Ordinance 3 of 1849, and clearly materialises the abyssal divide instituted by European colonists. This clause legitimised the erasure of indigenous onto-epistemologies, and reveals how colonial authorities "modified and manufactured" African indigenous world-making practices, "while claiming only to recognize or reinstate them" (Myers 2008, 11-12). When African practices were encountered by European colonists, they were interpreted with lenses that were inherently influenced by European history.

In addition, as colonial Christianity infiltrated African indigenous spaces, any and all relations with African invisible agents were forbidden, as Christian missionaries strove to 'civilise' the 'pagan' people of the continent (Nel 2007, 45). Within colonial spaces, any practices involving communication with the ancestors was considered to be idolatrous, and were by definition not counted as religious or civilised (Nel 2007, 45). This erasure was instigated with a specific agenda – to undermine the religio-socio-political authority structures around which African collectives cohered.

Diviners, tasked with consulting the ancestors on behalf of the collective, formed a line of authority from the human to the more-than-human domain, and thereby challenged colonial governance structures, as well as the authority of the Christian Church. To counter this, both missionaries and colonial officials collaborated in the "effort to undermine the religious

[32] Natal Ordinance 3 of 1849, quoted in T. W. Bennett, *A Sourcebook of African Customary Law for Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1991), 113.

authority of sacred specialists" (Chidester 1992, 39). As such, the maintenance of convivial relations between indigenous collectives and their ancestors were formulated as irreligious and repugnant, and did not make it into the written records created to circumscribe African indigenous culture.

By refusing to acknowledge the religio-social-political necessity of the ancestors, practices of material reciprocity between African people and their ancestors were made abyssal. With no notion of the need for domesticated agential relations between humans and nonhumans, British legislation, combined with the Christian fear and rejection of African relations with the more-than-human domain, began the dismantling of African modes of dynamic relationality.

The NCNL prescribed the "powers, authorities, duties, functions, rights and privileges of chiefs and headmen" (NCNL 1932, 06) within purely secular terms. Although African chieftains were instrumental in maintaining harmonious relations with the ancestors, this role was erased through colonial legislation. While the role of the African chief is not homogenous across the continent, records show a consistent pattern with regard to the indigenous leaderships' responsibility in maintaining good relations with the ancestors. Chiefs in the Southern African region were noted by Hammond Tooke as standing "at the apex of the religious system" (Hammond-Tooke 1974, 350), as they were responsible for engaging reciprocal relations with ancestral chieftains in the case of a collective emergency.

When the NCNL was introduced, it allowed for no spiritual authority on behalf of African leadership, which prevented chiefs from "performing their spiritual duties", and thereby profoundly disempowered African leadership structures (Gordon 2012, 51). This in turn disrupted the social balances that leaders provided. David Gordon, in his discussion of the Bemba people of Southern Africa, notes that "colonial administrations remained at best embarrassed" by the claims that African leaders bore spiritual responsibilities (Gordon 2012, 51). He also notes that the British introduction of indirect rule effectively "changed the nature of the chieftaincy by basing their political power on their ties to the colonial state instead of spiritual mediations" (Gordon 2012, 64). This process was replicated wherever indirect rule in Southern Africa took hold. The spiritual responsibilities of African leadership remained unwritten, thereby becoming abyssal wherever colonial legal structures dominated.

Another illustrative example involves the legal formalisation of *lobolo* practices in the NCNL, which did not account for the intrinsic involvement of the ancestors in this important religio-

socio-political process. *Lobolo* was roughly translated as 'bride price' by the colonists, and was understood to involve the 'payment' of cattle to the family of the bride as part of the marriage procedure. Legislation overlooked, and thereby erased, the "significant" link between the wedding parties and "their ancestral spirits" (Ngema 2013, 408) during *lobolo* negotiations. The practices surrounding *lobolo* connect "the ancestors of the two families" (Bayi & Hawthorne 2018, 586) who are considered spiritually and materially bonded through the process. Although *lobolo* involves ongoing "negotiations with the ancestors" (Nel 2007, 172), in the codification of customary law, *lobolo* was re-interpreted as simply "a type of commercial transaction, rather than as a reciprocal social obligation" (Myers 2008, 04). As the NCNL laws regarding *lobolo* practices made no mention of ancestral involvement, these important reciprocal relations were rendered invisible in the eyes of the law, and within the 'customs' of the African peoples.

Furthermore, the NCNL outlined the jurisdiction of African religious specialists. It recognised "medicine men and herbalists" (NCNL 1932, 20) and gave them permission to practice should they pay a licence fee to the colonial government, but it outlawed the practice of divination. It is divination, and the close relations with the ancestors that are established through divinatory practice, that underly the efficacy of African diviners (Masondo 2011, 22). Rather than establishing pragmatic and embodied relations with the ancestors, which is how diviners and healers received and maintained their community status, the NCNL legislated that African religious experts were to be validated only through the procurement of a written licence from colonial officials. In addition, the NCNL announced that any "spells, charms or super-natural agencies found in the possession of any person convicted of a contravention" (NCNL 1943, 21) of the NCNL would be confiscated.

There is a tragic irony in a body of laws that erases African relations with more-than-human agents, while also reserving the right to confiscate 'super-natural agencies' should they be located during the process of conviction. The NCNL outlawed divinatory practices as a form of 'pretence' punishable by law, thereby attempting an erasure of core onto-epistemological African world-making strategies. The legislation states that "any native who for gain practices as a diviner …. shall be guilty of an offence" and "convicted of obtaining money under false pretences" (NCNL 1891, Chapter XIII, 129.1-2). The engaging of reciprocal relations with the

ancestors was not only considered criminal, but was also made abyssal in that they were re-produced as fraudulent.

In my understanding, the remaking of African socio-religio-political practices as 'custom' or 'culture' severely disadvantaged indigenous Africans, and this distinction still functions to maintain the abyssal line in contemporary South Africa. In article 211(3) of the Constitution, it is stated that "customary law is associated with culture"[33], which continues to delimit African world-making practices in terms of their onto-epistemological value. In international human rights discourse, "religious rights are more highly regarded than the right to culture" (Amoah 2011, 37). For this reason, academic and legal analysis of world-religions are generally conducted as investigations into religion, not culture. And yet, African indigenous religio-socio-political practices continue to be conflated with culture, and thereby diminished. Contemporary attempts to equalise the "perceived hierarchical relationship between religion and culture" are often undermined by the sense that collectives must choose either one or the other of these modern constructs (Amoah 2011, 59). The "inevitable ossification and distortion" (Osman 2019, 01) of indigenous world-making practices, when reduced to 'culture' and captured in written law, continues to impose modern distinctions on indigenous practices that do not share the modern urge to reduce and categorise.

Through redefining the role of chieftains, *lobolo* agreements and African diviners/healers, these intrinsically nonmodern ways of engaging the world were re-made, and de-fused, to suit modern sensibilities. African world-making practices were stripped of their relational foundations, and written into 'customary laws' that reflected only the practices that did not disrupt European onto-epistemological hegemony.

If critical scholars of religion are to move beyond the colonial onto-epistemological closures associated with both Eurocentric Christianity and secular world-making, new metrics are essential. In my understanding, these metrics cannot cohere as long as the bounds of nature and culture continue to prescribe the onto-epistemological limits of the academic project.

[33] Article 211(3) of the South African Constitution and *dicta* by the Constitutional Court - 1995 (3) SA 391 (CC); 1995 (6) BCLR 665 (CC) paras 365-383.

3.5.2. The Limits of Natureculture

In as much as the modern project has been shaped by the polarised distinction between religion and the secular, another distinction is paramount. This is the distinction between nature and culture, which has only recently been reconsidered. I have argued that the historical nature/culture dichotomy has fuelled racial prejudice, and continues to reflect the presence of the abyssal line in contemporary world-making practices.

Bruno Latour writes that the modern project involves an agreement that the world consists of two halves, the natural and the cultural. By rigorously constructing the separate domains of nature and culture, the modern collective no longer needed to take into account "the delicate web of relations between things and people" (Latour 1993, 39) that characterise nonmodern world-making practices. After dividing the world into these two distinct ontological categories, the buffering of the modern individual was possible. The porous relationality of collectives beyond the modern prerogative no longer matter to the case at hand once their dynamic forms of material relationality have been sliced up to fit the modern dichotomy. That said, as 20th century discourse moved beyond the obvious dichotomies of modern thought, scholars begin to engage new conceptual apparatus to overcome the nature/culture divide. In the 21st century, the academy turns towards a *natureculture continuum* model, which overcomes many, but not all, of the limitations of the modern framework.

Critical scholars work to break the dichotomy between nature and culture by theorising the complexity that becomes visible when these two opposing constructs are viewed as part of a continuum. Natureculture as a new concept within contemporary discourse finds ground in the ontological turn, and is foundational to new materialist theory. Natureculture can be defined as "a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed" (Malone and Ovenden 2017, 01). Donna Haraway argues that all life takes shape within a "natureculture web", which decentres the human sufficiently for a new reading of the world to be possible (Haraway 1988, 593). Karen Barad also rejects the "assumption that there is a pure nature separate from culture" and notes that "the very undoing of the idea of the nature-culture boundary is a useful tool" (Barad 2007, 368). Critical posthuman discourse follows Haraway's lead towards destabilising this Cartesian dichotomy by focusing on natureculture as a continuum.

In the critical study of religion, the category of natureculture underlies new materialist approaches. Manuel Vasquez's commitment to "cultural realism" (Vasquez 2011, 06) points to this conceptual apparatus. Vasquez, in his book *More Than Belief, A Materialist Theory of Religion* (2011) discusses the materiality of "selves and culture…in their own right" (Vasquez 2011, 06), by examining religion as a material consequence of embodied and enacted culture. For Vasquez, the dynamics of culture rise to the level of materiality and thereby form the basis of an empirical material study of religion. Along the same lines, David Chidester writes that his material approach to religion "focuses on material engagements as essential in the cultural processes and productions of religion" (Chidester 2018, 12). Material and cultural dynamics are entwined in Chidester's approach, with culture being granted materiality through the ways in which it comes to matter. As with the critical posthuman thinkers I have considered, these critical religion scholars gravitate towards natureculture in response to the limits of the nature-culture dichotomy, but I will argue that they do not move beyond the modern limits established within the domains of nature and culture as separate constructs.

In current natureculture discourse the missing indigenous position is sorely felt. Although new materialist and posthuman scholars begin to embrace the physicality of relation, and factor relationality as intrinsic to the making of the material world, they do not yet accord onto-epistemological significance to the kind of relationality that highlights invisible persons. The reciprocal relations between humans, nonhumans and spirits is collapsed along the secular lines inherent in both nature and culture, as well as in the construct of natureculture. In my understanding, the postmodern turn towards natureculture is ultimately a hegemonic secular construction. It rests on the violent reduction of the relationality to either 'nature' or 'culture', and then offers only the combination of these two terms as remedy. The circulating formation of natureculture serves to absent and erase invisible agents and relations. In new materialist, posthuman, and religious studies discourse, the current domain of enquiry is dominated by this new conceptual apparatus. Within natureculture, the presence of secular limits is also the absence of nonsecular onto-epistemologies. To clarify this point, I will apply Chidester's dynamic material methodology to the matter of natureculture.

Analysing natureculture as a material formation makes this construct visible as a configuration of power in which "symbols, discourses, practices and institutions" (Chidester 2018, 75) are shaped according to secular closures. As Chidester has noted, mapping the

boundaries of material formations can provide important insights into the “assemblies of meaning and power” (Chidester 2018, 75) that constitute material dynamics. There are inherent assemblies of meaning and power in the secular formation of natureculture. Both the domain of nature, and the domain of culture are hegemonic constructs that emerged entangled with European Christian discourse over the course of the 2nd millennium. For those who argue that neither nature nor culture could provide coherent accounts of the dynamics of the material world, a continuum between the terms is intended to rectify the problem. Critical scholars, mollified by the collapse of the dichotomy, unproblematically accept the secular onto-epistemological limits of both nature and culture, which compound when combined into a continuum.

Locating the human within natureculture is “intended to portray the object of knowledge as an active, meaning-generating part of the apparatus of bodily production” (Haraway 1988, 593), and to move definitely past the immaterial subject constructed in historical European discourse. Within the formation of natureculture, the human is best understood as a "material-semiotic actor” (Haraway 1988, 593). The making of natureculture even allows for the mattering of nonhuman agents, with Haraway noting the generation of gods, goddesses, and ancestors within the semiotic-material framework (Haraway 2015, 162) that this continuum provides. However, the formation of semiotic material (a corollary of natureculture) remains conceptually limited to the possibilities inherent in the secular constructs of ‘semiosis’ and ‘matter’. In this view, invisible agents are material-semiotic actors only. Fundamentally ‘realist’ in its construction, the natureculture continuum can only allow for the mattering of invisible agents as products of entangled nature and culture. This removes the potential for examining the rich relationalities that cohere beyond Eurocentric closures.

The material formation of natureculture circulates into critical religious studies discourse, where it overcomes the longstanding Cartesian bind placed on critical scholars, but continues to circulate as a means of maintaining secular mores. Although the 21st century academy requires an accounting for alternate onto-epistemologies, very few (if any) alternate world-making practices inform the overall structure of the new frameworks that are being devised. Onto-epistemologies that are not resonant with secular closures continue to be rendered invisible within the natureculture enquiry space. The complex and reciprocal relations with

nonhuman and invisible agents that characterise contemporary nonmodern practices are permitted to matter only in 'natural' and 'cultural' regards, albeit on a continuum between the two. The reciprocal and material relationality of spirits, ancestors and divinities is reduced by the limits of natureculture as the secular academy defines it. This is evident within the domain of critical material religion studies. Physical objects are accepted as active nonhuman agents, but the other-than-human agents associated with religious practice do not rise to the level of materiality. A secular boundary remains in place, which allows natureculture to account for the vitality of objects, but does not extend to the mattering of invisible agents.

Circulating into the space of critical religion, the secular material limits of natureculture uphold historical European values. Despite acknowledgment that the origins of secular thinking lie in Christian ontology, this formation is allowed to circulate through critical religious studies discourse unchecked. Within the domain of natureculture, religion scholars are not motivated to account for the invisible agents associated with indigenous and pagan world-making practices. In this regard, the abyssal line is still present within the formation of natureculture as it is conceived by critical religion scholars. This continues to disenfranchise the peoples who suffered most under historical European imperialism. Myriad nonhuman and invisible agents have been noted and catalogued according to the testimonies of individuals, through the recording of stories and myths, and through observation of ritual practice, but an overarching non-theological and non-secular framework for examining invisible agents has not emerged. In the current re-working of critical religion that sees a turn to the material, the invisible agents of religion are overlooked.

Critical religious studies discourse, like critical posthumanism, coheres around new materialisms that take shape within a secularised natureculture continuum. This is problematic, as this continuum remains deeply engraved with the marks of modern onto-epistemological closures. The buffered human partakes only in limited forms of relationality. The limits of the secular buffered human are written into the shape of the modern research university itself, and allow for the formation of an academic enquiry space that still negates much of the world's knowledge generating capacities.

Why do key religious studies theorists overlook the category of invisible agents entirely in their accounts of religion? Why do critical posthuman theorists overlook the category of religion itself, and along with it the myriad nonhuman agents associated with this category?

The continued hegemony of secular reasoning in the modern academy now coheres in the newly minted natureculture continuum. The boundaries of this continuum make visible the abyssal line, which critical scholars are ultimately hesitant to cross.

Beyond both nature and culture there lies abundant ground for examination, and for reformulation of the religious studies purview. The nonmodern position engages the world in relational ways that are not reducible to natureculture as a secular construct. To account for the abyssal line that still structures critical religious studies discourse, and to allow for redress of the onto-epistemicide that this line entails, the nonmodern as a third-position requires the same level of scholarly attention that world-religions and secular developments are given. In addition, this attention must be focused through lenses that reflect nonmodern understandings of the world. It is not enough to integrate the conceptual apparatus provided by new materialism, posthumanism and the ontological turn. There is little point in liberating materiality and ontology from modern limits if the approach to the study of religion remains committedly secular. Absences in the lenses of enquiry also need to be accounted for. While new concepts and theories pave the way towards a non-secular study of religion, there remains a need for non-secular understandings to structure the wealth of new data available.

In what follows, I suggest that reading African folktales might help furnish critical scholars with a more inclusive approach to the study of religion on a global scale. Folk narratives constitute a record of indigenous onto-epistemological understandings of the world. I will argue that these nonmodern understandings, based on metrics that are not yet included in critical study, are pivotal for moving the academy past theological and secular reasoning.

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered the material dynamics of absence in the critical study of religion. Through this analysis the nonmodern domain becomes visible as a third-position alongside the dichotomy of world-religion and secular rhetoric. This position both disrupts the dichotomy, and also informs it. Othered and un-worlded by both world-religion and secular dynamics, the nonmodern emerges as an entangled construct that achieves global significance.

I have argued that by allowing this domain to matter, religious studies scholars might forge a path beyond both theological and secular reasoning. As discussed in Chapter One, the

theological position I am referring to is that which formed the basis of the early science of religion, a Protestant based theological approach to scientific analysis that assumes a transcendental essence, while relying on disenchanted metrics. The secular position that forms in response to this theological approach is defined in opposition to this particular form of theology. If scholars were to move beyond this modern dichotomy, the resulting study of religion would be better equipped to provide an account of religion that matters to peoples in the global south. By accounting for unworlded-religions without 'white-washing' them into the world-religions category, present and historical exclusions can better be accounted for. Once the nonmodern domain is recognised as a salient position, questions about animism and ontology can be considered with the use of nonmodern conceptual apparatus. This may lead to a disruption of modern onto-epistemological certainties, not in order to undo them, but to provide a supplement.

From my position at the border, I have argued that accounting for the abyssal absences within the critical study of religion is imperative if the discipline is to finally cohere as a legitimate domain of study. If absences are given material attention within the academy, the nonmodern will come to matter. One result of this is that the modern construction of nature and culture come into question, and the abyssal reasoning that went into shaping these constructs, can receive critical attention. Many contemporary scholars already acknowledge the modern limits written into the nature-culture dichotomy, and the solution has been to collapse these terms into a continuum. However, I have argued that the entanglement of natureculture, as long as it remains shaped by secular reasoning, continues to inform and maintain abyssal exclusions in the study of religion. With the collapsing of nature and culture into a continuum, the practices and understandings of people within the unworlded religious traditions are overlooked. These traditions developed before the modern dichotomy formed, and are not represented by a simple collapsing of the dichotomy.

In the following chapter I will suggest a response to this. This response emerges from my location at the border of the northern canon. The work of acknowledging and responding to the abyssal divide forms the beginnings of a bridge over its depths. However, bridges are not indicative of what lies on the far shore. The work of a bridge is to secure the span between domains. In my understanding, this will involve opening the natureculture continuum to the

mattering of nonmodern world-making practices. By reading a third position into natureculture, I intentionally recognize the global salience of nonmodern worlds.

With this knowledge in place, the basic formwork of the bridge begins to cohere. This allows me to begin an investigation of certain nonmodern and unworlded lenses of enquiry, to make sense of the expanded continuum. While scholars from the global north have provided stepping stones to bridge the gap between modern and nonmodern onto-epistemologies, scholars from the global south have provided nuanced discussions of the ways that research and analysis may proceed in a critically inclusive study. Without input from the abyssal side of the line, any movements towards dissolving this line remain hampered by modern lenses that are difficult to shake.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTING THE NONMODERN

The antimoderns, like the postmoderns, have accepted their adversaries' playing field. Another field - much broader, much less polemical has opened up before us: the field of nonmodern worlds.

- Bruno Latour

4.1. Introduction

I have argued that the academic study of religion, as a secular venture, is constructed by scholars from the global north, and does not sufficiently account for world-making practices from the global south. The abyssal divide that ensures the primacy of modern onto-epistemological positions makes it difficult, if not impossible, for secular scholars to material religion effectively. What matters in the study of religion remains under debate. From my position at the border of the northern canon, I have worked with a host of scholars from the global north, all of whom provide useful conceptual and critical apparatus for enquiring into the absences this divide engenders.

In Chapter One I discussed the exclusive humanist limits of the material approach to religious studies, as well as the secular limits written into this modern project. I argued that David Chidester points beyond modern exclusive human, and hints at ways in which the 'being of the human' might be disrupted. Chidester's material approach is unique to the critical study of religion, in that it offers a non-theological approach to materialising theological constructs, thereby providing a method and an object that does not transgress secular limits. However, in as much as it does not question the secular foundations of modern religious studies, it requires further critical development.

In Chapter Two I turned to critical posthumanism to supplement Chidester's gesture beyond exclusive humanism in the study of religion. I argued that the explicit acknowledgment of agency extending beyond the human is imperative for a study of religion that hopes to remain relevant in the 21st century. However, although posthumanists discuss the agency of physical things, thereby breaking hold of the exclusively human agent, it does not extend to discussions of the agencies involved in religious practice. In particular, the invisible persons that emerge through nonmodern ways of making the world are not given any attention in

posthuman discourse. As with the critical study of religion, critical posthumanism is truncated by the secular limits built into the modern project. As such, both of these postmodern developments are still limited by modern prerogatives, and therefore uphold the abyssal line that erases alternative onto-epistemologies. In this regard, a critical study of religion that incorporates a posthuman conceptual apparatus could escape the bounds of exclusive humanism but would still be limited by modern secular closures.

In Chapter Three I looked at the heuristic category of the *nonmodern*, alongside the binary categories of world-religion and the secular project. I did this in an attempt to move critical religious studies discourse beyond the limits of secularism, without resorting to theological reasoning. I suggested that the nonmodern, as a third position beside the modern dichotomy of secularism/world-religion, offers an important domain for critical investigation. Unworlded religions, and their historical exclusion, have not yet been sufficiently accounted for. By attending to material absences in the study of religion, the ongoing construction of the abyssal line becomes visible. This hegemonic device ensures the primacy of knowledge from the global north, and the continued erasure of knowledge from the global south. Critical religion studies must account for the abyssal line, and the exclusions this line engenders have yet to be addressed.

However, it is not sufficient to critique western exclusivism only through the work of western theorists. Anthropologist Talal Asad and Sociologist Charles Taylor both provide important critiques of modern secularity, but do not themselves represent nonmodern collectives. Chidester's novel material approach to religion, Barad's reworking of the onto-epistemological divide, and even de Sousa Santos' formulation of the abyssal line, have all been produced in metropolitan spaces, and as such can only point to the abyssal nonmodern. What is needed next is a set of lenses developed by nonmodern scholars, which will provide a framework supports and defines the value of nonmodern world-making practices. This framework is needed to make sense of the theoretical lenses presented in previous chapters, and thereby to make present the foundational nonmodern experience of the world that is needed to move the study of religion past modern limits.

For this, I turn to Sub-Saharan African onto-epistemologies through an engagement with the work of Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola. I approach Tutuola's work using the analysis that Cameroonian anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh provides. Nyamnjoh's reflections on Tutuola's

novels makes visible a rich African nonmodern framework. Together, Tutuola and Nyamnjoh present a set of practical understandings that cohere around African indigenous world-making practices. It is my hope that with these understandings in place, the conceptual apparatus discussed in previous chapters can be employed to further the mattering of the nonmodern on a global scale.

Nyamnjoh identities three important nonmodern approaches through the analysis of Tutuola's work in his book *Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd* (2017). They are the acknowledgement of incompleteness as the ground of world-making, convivial relations as sustaining harmonious world-making within and amongst collectives, and the role of domesticated agency, in which the individual agent is able to work closely with the needs of the collective. Tutuola highlights how African indigenous practices are deeply entangled in agential relations with nonhuman and invisible persons.

I will apply the material methodology that I have developed from Chidester's approach, to the analysis of invisible agents, shaped by the nonmodern criteria that Nyamnjoh gleans from Tutuola's novels. Invisible persons are made material through the ways they come to matter in the world. I will suggest that by allowing for the material analysis of invisible persons as a primary feature in the critical study of religion, the field may open to inclusive practice that is able to account for colonial and racially driven onto-epistemicide.

It is a challenge to analyse nonmodern and indigenous practices with language developed within the modern project. Throughout this chapter, I will use the cumbersome compound 'religio-socio-political' when referring to African indigenous practice. This is an attempt to acknowledge the indigenous holism in which distinctions between religion, society and politics do not hold. While practices in the global north rely on these distinctions, they are also entangled with European colonial agendas. By using the compound religio-socio-political when discussing indigenous practices, I hope to work against linguistic and conceptual hegemony within the field of religious studies. This is a challenging goal, and I will move between paradigms rather loosely, in as much as I will still use modern and secular language when attempting to make sense of nonmodern processes. This clumsy attempt at integrating the nonmodern into secular academic discourse, in order to disrupt said discourse, requires a nimble and light-footed appropriation of both modern and nonmodern terms. The outcome

may be inelegant, but it will hopefully also be egalitarian, and pave the way for a critically inclusive study of religion to take material form.

4.2. The Writings of Amos Tutuola

In reaching for an example of the lenses by which indigenous people structure their worlds, I examine the work of Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola, with help from the critical analysis provided by the African anthropologist Francis Nyamnjoh.

Amos Tutuola does important work in terms of presenting Nigerian folk-tales in English, while not allowing this colonial language to restrict the onto-epistemological landscape from which his stories emerge. His idiosyncratic use of the English language can be understood as an expression of resistance to colonial mores, and initially posed a challenge to educated Nigerian readers when his work was first published in 1952. That said, his novels were well received in England and France, where he was considered to be one of the first great African writers. Later in the century, as Europe lost interest in his work, his African compatriots became enamoured with the postcolonial possibilities that his novels presented. He wrote without apology from the abyssal side of the line, fore-fronting ghosts, spirits and ancestors alongside his human protagonists. As such, his work provides a valuable opportunity for examining the third position as it takes shape in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the plethora of invisible agents involved in African world-making practices.

4.2.1. The Ways in Which Tutuola Comes to Matter

In 1952, Nigerian author Amos Tutuola published his first African novel in English (Ogundiran 2022, 828), with his book entitled *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. The novel takes place within a vivid sensorial landscape, inspired by his lived experiences, and based on Yoruba folk-tales (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 29). Tutuola writes without the onto-epistemological closures that accompany the modern project, leading to the description of his work as “strange, poetic, nightmare” material (Calder-Marshall 1975, 10). In the following excerpt from *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, the strange and poetic nature of his work is evident.

> …these fellows (Drum, Song and Dance) came and when ’Drum’ started to beat himself, all the people who had been dead for hundreds of years rose up and came to witness ’Drum’ beating; and when ’Song’ began to sing, all domestic animals of that new town, bush animals with snakes, etc. came out

> to see 'Song' personally, but when 'Dance' started to dance, the whole bush creatures, spirits, mountain creatures and also all the river creatures, came to the town to see who was dancing. When these three fellows started at the same time, the whole people of the new town, the whole people that rose up from the grave, snakes, spirits and other nameless creatures, were dancing together with these three fellows... (Tutuola 1952, 84)

In his second novel, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), the ghosts who form the focus of the story are not the spirits of deceased humans, they are instead "the permanent inhabitants of the Other World, who have never lived as mortals, but who have intimate knowledge of that life and are in constant intercourse with it" (Moore 1975, 53). There is the "Smelling Ghost" who is covered with "all kinds of snakes, centipedes and flies" (Tutuola 1954, 29) and the "River-Ghosts" who have such high regard for the narrator of the story that only their "chief ancestor" is "permitted by his highest title" to approach him (Tutuola 1954, 73). Later the protagonist flees and takes refuge with the "spider eating ghosts" where he is "wrapped as a chrysalis by the web" and left dangling in the breeze (Tutuola 1954, 89), only to be discovered a few days later by a ghost who thought the chrysalis was "the body of his dead father" and was "exceedingly glad" (Tutuola 1954, 90). The ghost proceeds to arrange a ritual burial for the narrators bound body, from which he only narrowly escapes. The story continues to weave in and out of multiple 'towns' inhabited by myriad different forms of ghost, with the narrator barely surviving each encounter.

European critics described his work as depicting "a fantasy life as barbarous, bloody and frightening as the masks of the tribal ceremonies" (Pritchett 1975, 21). However, Nyamnjoh notes that Tutuola's work cannot be considered as simply fiction, but instead depicts "endogenous epistemologies" that are "shared with many other communities" across the African continent (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 29). Tutuola "draws on popular philosophies of life, personhood and agency in Africa" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 18), resulting in protagonists who are not the "absolute monarch exerting untrammelled authority over the rest of the universe" (Obiechina 1975, 126), but instead find themselves as one agent among many when exploring the relational world of spirits.

Tutuola's novels have all been highly controversial, and have elicited responses "ranging from delirious enthusiasm to amused indifference to undisguised contempt" (Lindfors 1975, xiii).

While some European critics painted Tutuola's contributions as "ruled by the dreadful conspiracy of primitive belief and sensibility" (Pritchett 1975, 22), others praised his inventive use of English, which broke all the rules of modern grammar, and underlay his ability to present "pristine, pagan, old African" folklore in a vivid and compelling manner (Collins 1975, 64). Literary scholars acknowledged that his work accurately reflected the folk tales of his people, while also fitting the "very ancient folklore patterns" (Collins 1975, 62) discerned within European literature. Harold Collins, in an article published in the *Critique* in 1961, discussed the journey of the protagonist in *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952), as reflecting the "Quest to the Underworld", and the journey depicted in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) as a "quest in reverse, or West African Odyssey" (Collins 1975, 62). In this regard, European critics were able to fit Tutuola's contributions to the categories of folklore that extended back to Europe's ancient past, and thereby both de-fuse it and render it valuable to modern scholarship.

However, his work was not well received in his homeland of Nigeria. Responding to a favourable review in the weekly news magazine *The New West Africa* (a London publication that was distributed throughout Africa), Yoruba reader Babasola Johnson argued that the "Palm Wine Drinkard should not have been published at all" as it contravened the correct use of the English language, and also included elements that were "foreign to Yoruba speech" (Johnson 1975, 31-32). Another commentator writing to the magazine after the publication of Johnson's objections noted that "there are a great many West Africans who agree with Mr. Johnson, and deplore the high praise that has been given to this writer's work" (Mackay 1975, 43). The following sentence from *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is a good example of Tutuola's unusual and descriptive approach to transcribing his narrative voice into English.

> Again in my great surprise there were "all coloured lights" which lighted and shone as diamonds on to every part of the house, even I tried my best to find out where the lights were coming, but it was in vain, because it was not quenched both day and night. (Tutuola 1954, 120)

To elucidate Tutuola's perceived deficiencies, an unnamed Nigerian correspondent writing to *The New West Africa* suggested that Tutuola's lack of education, and his "semi-literate state", rendered him "helpless to do anything about" his unusual use of the English language (Lindfors 1975, 37). Rather than engaging the intriguing ways that Tutuola appropriated

English, these early critics rejected his contributions as coming from an uneducated man, and thereby as being unworthy of international attention. It was only later that the African public became more accepting of Tutuola's work. When considering Tutuola's changing fortunes amongst his people, the impact of the abyssal line becomes salient. In order to understand Tutuola's initial rejection by African critics, and his later reappraisal, a closer look at colonial erasure is needed.

4.2.2. Abyssal Developments

As part of the colonial mandate, colonised peoples were expected to adopt the language of their oppressors, and punished for using their native tongue (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 13). Nigerians who managed to excel under colonial administration, those considered 'elite' due to their integration of English language and culture, found Tutuola's writing to be unacceptable to their modernised sensibilities. Indigenous Africans were expected to abandon their native onto-epistemologies in favour of the Christocentric constructions of their colonial masters. Those who adopted the colonisers language, as well as the colonisers view of the world at large, were able to reach elite status within the social and political structures that Europeans maintained on African soil.

As de Sousa Santos notes, the "disqualification" of the agents that matter within indigenous onto-epistemologies is one of the more insidious outcomes of colonialism (de Sousa Santos 2014, 152). The outcome of these erasures is an African elite, who in the 1950's, found their "endogenous systems of thought" to be "unthinkable" (Mudimbe 1988: x). Tutuola's haphazard use of the English language, and his insistence on featuring ghosts and spirits in his narrative, was seen as "providing the supercilious westerner with an excuse for continuing to patronize the allegedly superstitious Nigerian" (Collins 1975, 59). As such, the rejection of Tutuola's work amongst the Nigerian population can be seen as a direct result of the abyssal line, with which colonisers rendered indigenous onto-epistemologies irrational, primitive and ultimately unworthy of attention. As European material formations governing acceptable world-making practices circulated into African spaces, Africans with access to colonial privileges began to favour European onto-epistemologies.

However, as the century progressed, and colonial rule collapsed, African scholars began envisioning the postcolonial conditions needed to recover from decades of oppression. In 1961, Sudanese poet Taban Lo Liyong published an article urging African readers to let go of

the distain they felt towards Tutuola's work. He argued that rejecting Tutuola's contribution would lead to a position in which "we shall have cut our very umbilical cord" and disown "our mother" (Taban Lo Liyong 1975, 118). Emmanuel Obiechina, in 1968, argued for the value of Tutuola's ability "to assimilate elements peculiar to the oral tradition to elements peculiar to the literary tradition" (Obiechina 1975, 144). The newfound appreciation of Tutuola's use of English took inspiration from Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, who wrote that the English language should "be able to carry the weight of my African experience", and in so doing would "have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (Achebe 1965, 30). As part of the postcolonial project, leading African thinkers began working on reclaiming the value and importance of their indigenous onto-epistemological understandings, and the languages that allowed these understandings to be expressed.

4.2.3. Valuing the Third Position

By allowing endogenous world-making practices to matter within formerly colonised spaces, key scholars began rejecting the "colonialism of power, of knowledge, of being" (De Sousa Santos 2018, 22) that remained after colonial governance had collapsed. In doing so, they began to make visible the ways that indigenous knowledge had been relegated to "nonexistence, radical invisibility, and irrelevance" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 25). As de Sousa Santos notes, "during the period of historical colonialism, the written text was often used to silence the oral text of the colonized" (de Sousa Santos 2018, 61). Reclaiming the value of indigenous oral tradition was an important step towards dissolving abyssal thinking within postcolonial collectives.

Tutuola was acknowledged as a novelist who had "reached out, acquired and domesticated" the "otherwise strange and foreign English language" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 77). Harry Garuba notes that Tutuola's work presents an endogenous avenue for "the transition from the oral tale to the written text" and praises "the oral storytelling voice that suddenly announces its status as print" (Garuba, 2015)[34]. Within the vital third position, world-making practices take

[34] *And the Books Lived Happily Ever After*, http: //chimurengachronic.co.za/and-the-books-lived-happily-ever-after, accessed 18 December 2023.

shape within oral traditions that involve "a particular vision of the world, or rather a particular *presence* in the world - a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together and interact" (Hampâté Ba 1981, 168). This holistic view of the cosmos has been unworlded along with the peoples who maintain these understandings.

Oral knowledge transmission is a distinctive and exclusive form of communication for which writing is not "as a supplement to speaking" but rather "its foe" (Smith 1998, 371). As a static and 'complete' form of knowledge transmission, "writing does not leave the virtues of orality intact", but undercuts them by imposing a formal structure on knowledges that are inherently dynamic (Smith 1998, 371). Tutuola's written record of Nigerian folktales is particularly important, as he uses the English language in ways that transgress and disrupt the linear and fixed nature of both the written word and the material world. He manages to present a flexible and fluid cosmos (Mudimbe-Boyi 2017, 21) in which "categories acquire meaning only through action and interaction" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 21). As such, he appropriates the European practice of writing to give substance to worlds best engaged through the spoken word, thereby bringing African onto-epistemologies to the fore.

Ugandan academic Dani Wadada Nabudere, argues in his book *Afrikology, Philosophy and Wholeness: An Epistemology* (2011), that "in order to *gain control* of the real", the modern project has appropriated language and the written word to secure a hegemony on global knowledge (Nabudere 2011, 86 emphasis in original). He notes that "knowledge in African societies is not something abstract and separate from life", but instead takes shape within oral tradition as a form of lived experience (Nabudere 2011, 88). In this regard, Tutuola's integration of oral modes of knowledge production into written texts fends off "the one-dimensionalism of resilient colonialism and the ambitions of purity and completeness which it claims and inspires" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 29), and baffles "the Cartesian mind accustomed to dividing everything up into clear-cut categories" (Hampâté Ba 1981, 168). An example from Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) helps to illustrate this characteristic of his work.

> After they listened to my songs for about half an hour, the chief ancestor took me out of this room which was specially built for me, then he rooted out a

> tall coconut tree which was about 300 feet long, after that he put me on the top of this tree, then another ghost who was next in rank to him put the tree on his head upright which means I was on the topmost of it, after that he jumped together with the tree onto the chief ancestors head so the chief ancestor, the one on his head who was next in rank to him, the tree and myself on this tree with all the rest ghosts and ghostesses were dancing together. (Tutuola 1954, 75)

Wole Soyinka also endorses Tutuola's work for the ways in which it "shies away from rigid compartmentalisation," noting how Tutuola's stories allow for vivid relationality between different realms of being (Soyinka 2014: vii). This form of relationality is present in folktales around the globe, and speaks to some of the unworlded understandings that I will be unpacking in this chapter.

4.3. African Onto-epistemologies

Folklore as a category of European analysis can be seen as a repository for nonmodern and indigenous knowledge. It is a written record of the third position, that which is neither world-religion nor secular reason, the literary voice of unworlded traditions. Often included within the western academy for its novelty value, this body of knowledge is mostly overlooked in terms of the onto-epistemological contribution it makes. Allowed to matter as imaginary, irrational or primitive, folklore has generally been relegated to the abyssal side of the line[35].

In this section, I will discuss three primary onto-epistemological understandings found within African folklore, based on Tutuola's work. They are the understanding of incompleteness, of conviviality and of domesticated agency. The overarching theme that unites these understandings is holistic relationality.

I will argue that African nonmodern understandings of relation can be presented as a basis for the analysis of nonsecular materiality by acknowledging the lived-experience that allows for pragmatic relations to develop, and by engaging a material methodology to analyse these relations. For this, convivial scholarship is needed. From my position at the border of the

[35] That said there have been subversive voices within the northern canon who point to the relevance of folktales for understanding the human psyche (Andrew Lang) and better engaging practical realities.

northern canon, within view of the openings provided by African nonmodern world-making, I am able to point towards those relational openings. Convivial scholarship allows for multiple onto-epistemologies to take center-stage alongside each other, with no hegemony given to one over the other. Convivial approaches to working with the onto-epistemologies of folk-tales, which allow for the material relevance of indigenous world-making practices, is needed for the development of a critically inclusive study of religion.

4.3.1. Folk Knowledge

Francis Nyamnjoh notes that Amos Tutuola's stories are "inspired by shared cosmologies and ontologies common in oral traditions and folktales across Africa" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 63). Historically, the onto-epistemological value of folk-tales has been underestimated, with folk or indigenous knowledge being produced as abyssal within academic discourse.

The term 'folklore' first came into use in 1846, when an Englishman by the name of William John Thoms (1803- 1885) suggested that the existing field of "Popular Antiquities" … "would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore - the Lore of the People" (Thoms 1846, 862)[36]. The category of Popular Antiquities had been in circulation in Europe since the 17th century, when scholars of local cultural began collating, amongst other things, traditional knowledge and narratives of "preternatural events" by consulting "living people as repositories" (Dorson 1968, 05). These collections relied heavily on the oral transmission of knowledge within the rural populations of Europe, and documented marvellous tales of "Spirits and angels" as well as "ghosts and fairies" (Dorson 1968, 09). Discourse on popular antiquities in the 17th century was marked by a field-defining distinction between "men of learning and the People, between the written Word, which had been wiped clean by public authority of the old superstitions, and oral Tradition, which kept them alive" (Dorson 1968, 14-15). By the 19th century, when Thoms introduced the category of folk-lore in place of popular antiquities, it was generally assumed that "the battle of reason over superstition" had been won, and that "Victorian gentry could smile at vulgar antiquities as the heritage of the unlettered and the unknowing" (Dorson 1968, 19). Importantly, the formation of this category developed in tandem with Europe's colonial exploits around the globe.

[36] In *The Athenaeum* weekly paper, Aug 22, 1846, No. 982

Towards the end of the 19th century, John Lubbock (1834 – 1913), President of the Ethnographical Society in England, insisted that in order to understand "the antiquities of Europe", scholars must compare them with practices used by "savage races in other parts of the world" (Lubbock 1865, 337). Nineteenth century European scholars consulted the works of colonial travellers and missionaries to establish a continuity between European folklore and the "existing customs and traditions" (Dorson 1968, 202) of so-called savages. A well-known example of this type of exposition can be found in the work of Edward B. Tylor who argued that there is "scarce a hand's breadth of difference between an English ploughman and a negro of Central Africa" (Tylor 1920 [1871], 22). In this hegemonic colonial discourse, Europeans who still engaged pagan traditions were considered to be engaging premodern practices. In this way, indigenous knowledge both within and outside of Europe was officially relegated to a "lower order of knowledge production" within the European academy (Semali & Kincheloe 1999, 21). As the complex relational practices of indigenous collectives were reclassified as folk knowledge, rather than necessary knowledge, the "power and agency in the religious field" (Kapalo 2013, 5) was redistributed.

The lack of written texts within indigenous spaces also resulted in their onto-epistemological contributions being dismissed by western scholars for whom "the definition of literacy as authoritative, logical, and universal" (Kincheloe 1999, 12) rendered indigenous knowledge systems as nonauthoritative. The unwillingness to credit the ways that oral knowledge operates to practically guide and inform lived experience makes abyssal the ways of knowing employed by indigenous peoples (Semali 1999, 17). It is important to note that the process of rendering indigenous knowledge as abyssal "cannot be separated from the oppression of indigenous peoples" (Semali & Kincheloe 1999, 28), and is intimately entangled with Europe's colonising project.

Nyamnjoh argues that Tutuola's stories "constitute an ontological epistemological order" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 193) that is valuable to scholars aiming to look beyond modern limits. This order is inherently characterised by reciprocal relations between human persons and other-than-human persons. Tutuola's literary contribution is full of these relations, describing "a universe of agency ad infinitum" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 256), populated by beings who are "constantly in need of activation, potency and enhancement through relationships" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 258). His stories do not emerge from a prehistoric or stationary indigenous

world. Rather, he combines agents and technologies that are endogenous to Africa with those that have been imported into Africa by western influence. In this way Tutuola acknowledges that "all cultures (especially colonized ones) are perpetually in a state of change" (Semali & Kincheloe 1999, 22), and allows for the mattering of indigenous lived experience as a contemporary and dynamic concern.

As such, Tutuola allows "forgotten or marginalised values" to matter alongside, and in conversation with "new ways of being and becoming" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 128). While "indigenous knowledge is not a monolithic epistemological concept" (Semali 1999, 24), Nyamnjoh weaves together Tutuola's stories to show the ways in which these stories resonate "across Africa", by peoples who "share similar cosmologies and act in tune with related ontologies" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 199).

The realm of indigenous knowledge is not a monolith, and is heterogenous according to geographical location and historical concerns, but it is also not a realm of discrete world-making practices that occur only in isolated and autonomous clusters. As such, I have argued that the resonances shared between disparate indigenous collectives matter in a way that should allow for indigenous onto-epistemology, as a coherent construct, to impact the ongoing global discourse in the study of religion.

In this chapter I am suggesting a set of lenses for engaging third position onto-epistemologies, by turning to some important African ways of knowing and making the world. They are firstly the acknowledgement of dynamic incompleteness in the ongoing becoming of the world, as opposed to Enlightenment notions of complete and unmoving truths. Secondly, the understanding that in a world of incomplete becomings, relations are primary and conviviality is essential. And thirdly, that all agency, be it human or nonhuman, requires domestication, a process which works to align individual actions for the benefit of the collective.

4.3.2. Dynamic Incompleteness

Nyamnjoh's discussion of incompleteness is derived from the "popular ideas of what constitutes reality in Africa" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 02) found in Tutuola's work. These "ontologies of incompleteness" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 02) describe a world where no 'thing' is final, and where every 'thing' is in the process of becoming in continual relation, providing a striking resonance with new materialist and posthuman discourse. Rosi Braidotti writes on "life as

perpetual becoming" (Braidotti 2012, 138), and discusses the inter-relational manner in which things come to matter "through interaction with multiple others" (Braidotti 2012, 89). Elisabeth Grosz, in the compilation *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010) also points to the incompleteness of agential entities by noting that they are "never the same, never self-identical" and "always and imperceptibly becoming other than" (Grosz 2010, 146) the past and present versions of themselves.

Nyamnjoh notes that in an incomplete world, "nothing but change is permanent" and "life is a currency in perpetual circulation" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04). This perspective offers an alternative to "the illusion of the autonomous, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent individual" and encourages the celebration of "incompleteness as the normal order of being and of things" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 20). Based on Tutuola's stories, Nyamnjoh explains that "things, words, deeds and beings are always incomplete, not because of absences but because of their possibilities" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 256). The same notions can be found in Coole and Frost's introduction to *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), where they present material phenomena as being "caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces" which leads the scholar to "consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency" (Coole & Frost 2010, 09). Their new materialist position describes agents and subjectivities which consist of an "open series of capacities or potencies" (Coole & Frost 2010, 10) that emerge through ongoing relational dynamics.

The physical sciences have also recently moved towards theories of incompleteness, as the Newtonian model of reality gave way to Einstein's theory of relativity over the course of the 20th century. Rather than a world composed of complete and closed systems, theoretical physics now describes a world of complex and indeterminate systems, which are by nature incomplete. While the social sciences have lagged somewhat in responding to this shift, there is already work being done in transdisciplinary spaces to acknowledge the dynamic and mutable nature of the social domain. In the study of religion, Chidester's material approach derives from the interdisciplinary discourse on dynamic systems that characterised the 2nd half of the 20th century. His focus on the dynamics of materiality creates an opening for the conception of religion as an incomplete process, always in a state of dynamic change.

Notably, the African onto-epistemological position on dynamic relational processes predates new materialist, posthuman, and physical science discourse. However, the value of African

knowledge making is not yet a point of interest in the wider academy. The abyssal line, inscribed through colonial conquest and racist metrics, contributes to a limit within contemporary discourse, and renders the African indigenous perspective invisible to modern and postmodern thinking on the nature of reality. If this limit where to be overcome, post-human, new materialist, and critical religion scholars might more readily engage with the African notion of 'convivial relations' as a pragmatic prerequisite for responding to incompleteness in the becoming of the world. In this way, practical responses to incompleteness could inform both religious studies theory and praxis, and open avenues for ongoing discussions around the ethico-onto-epistemologies that Karen Barad suggests are needed for successfully navigating the 21st century.

4.3.3. Convivial Relations

Modelling the world as dynamically incomplete leads to the need for conviviality. To be convivial in an incomplete world promotes engagement with the "logic of collective action" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04), and provides a coherent response to a world understood through constant relation.

> Conviviality is recognition and provision for the fact or reality of being incomplete. If incompleteness is the normal order of things – natural, human and supernatural – conviviality invites us to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of perfection. Conviviality emphasises the repair rather than the rejection of human relationships. It is more about cobbling and less about ruptures. (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 4-5)

In a world that is never complete, always changing, and always relational, conviviality is an adaptive strategy for success. Conviviality suggests "modes of influence" that are not based on "coercive violence and control" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 253), but rather privilege "dialogue and consensus over zero sum games" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 263). In a context where all relations are a work in progress, conviviality allows for the negotiation and navigation of endless possibilities (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 263).

It's important to note that Nyamnjoh's presentation of conviviality is not intended to present a relational world in which every agent is bound by these rules as a matter of course. Rather,

engaging convivial world-making practices is one of many different ways to work with the incompleteness of the world at large. There are other prominent forms of relational networks within indigenous African collectives that are not structured by personal relations of convivial reciprocity, but rather by the hierarchal dynamics inherent in politics. Historically, within Cape Nguni collectives the homestead was the place for personal reciprocal relations with ancestral agents (Chidester 1992, 04). On a larger scale the Chief's spiritual authority over multiple homesteads rested in dynamic power relations that were more to do with land and resources ownership. Relations between chiefs and ritual specialists were also often contested, with "religious claims to sacred power" (Chidester 1991, 19) forming the basis of a dynamic political system.

The dynamics of dominance that underlie unequal relations within indigenous collectives have been well documented. In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on relations of conviviality between human and nonhuman agents in order to foreground this lesser documented form of relationality. By bringing it to the foreground, I present human/nonhuman reciprocal relations as significant from a scholarly perspective. In Tutuola's work, conviviality is not only extended to familial groups, or even only to humans. Rather, all agents across the spectrum of becoming are approached with conviviality (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04). Despite the differences between agents, conviviality becomes the basis for reciprocity, relationships of mutual exchange rather than relationships of conquest and control (Ciofalo 2019, 69).

When considering human/nonhuman relations, modern scholarship generally focuses on *transactions*, rather than reciprocity. From the Latin *transigere* to 'drive through', a transaction is a method of relation which is highly ratified, and often framed in terms of property ownership. In the study of indigenous relations, humans are viewed as either the dominant party, who use their power to manipulate nonhuman agents (Crocker & Crocker 1994; Fausto 1999) or nonhuman agents are viewed dominant, and require persuasion to act beneficently (Gregor 1977; Wright 1998). When studied within a transactional schema, relations are generally considered to be asymmetric, and human agents are seen in isolation, negotiating the power imbalances between themselves and nonhuman others.

When moving away from the transactional model, and considering convivial reciprocity between human and nonhuman as a way of structuring and navigating a dynamic and incomplete world, many new questions come to the fore. What dynamic material systems

contribute to the emergence of convivial and/or non-convivial relations? What material dynamics of reciprocity can be mapped in the analysis of human relations with other-than-human persons? The categories, formations, circulations and material absences of reciprocal relations between humans and nonhumans provides a domain of analysis that remains unexamined.

Reciprocity is a vital characteristic of indigenous relations between both human and other-than-human agents. According to James Cox "reciprocity between the community and the spirits" (Cox 2000, 232) is central to African indigenous religious practices. On a global scale, Graham Harvey notes that "intimate reciprocal relationships between human people (ancestors, living and yet-to-be-born) and all other-than-human people" (Harvey 2000, 12) are characteristic of most indigenous collectives. Anthropologist Basil Sansom noted that reciprocity within African indigenous collectives "works to counter misfortune that strikes individuals" (Sansom 1974, 156), and that "acts of apparently unstinting giving are the premiums in social insurance" (Sansom 1974, 156) within these nonmodern spaces. Relational reciprocity is a foundational world-making practice for those collectives that make up the third position.

Amongst the Matsigenka people of the Andes, reciprocal relations with nonhuman others are carefully cultivated, so that they can "rest assured that their mutual expectations are fulfilled" (Rosengren 2006, 809). Native American peoples also engage reciprocal relations with invisible persons, through dreams and the giving of gifts, which informs the diagnostic practice of native healers (Ciofalo 2019, 17-18). Ingold, discussing indigenous peoples in a more general sense, suggests that "beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence" (Ingold 2007, 10). An example of this principle can be found in the African concept of *ubuntu,* which is described by the isiZulu aphorism *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*. It means "a person is a person through other persons" (Tutu 2004, 25). Ubuntu describes the grounds for a different kind of relation, convivial rather than transactional[37].

[37] The principle of *ubuntu* displays a practical acknowledgement of the intra-actions described by Karen Barad as fundamental to the making of the world. Once again, the relationality that the posthumanists engage is not newly conceived, but features as intrinsic within the nonmodern space of African practice.

The acknowledgement of "interdependencies and entanglements" provides a basis for a "language of conviviality" and helps to structure the "infinity of possibilities" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 27) inherent in a dynamic cosmos. A world of infinite possibilities, bound by interdependencies and entanglements, is a world of porous relations, "a world of spirits, powers and cosmic forces" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 08), entangled with human individuals, animals, and natural happenings. By allowing these characteristics of African onto-epistemology to matter, the boundaries of exclusive humanism are dissolved, and the scholarly thrall to secular reasonings might be disrupted.

Set up as a binary relation, the human being is either buffered or porous, either in control, or lacking control. The African nonmodern suggests that it is possible to follow trails that move past "the origins and dominance of homogenising Eurocentric modernity and its traditions of meaning making" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 29). In order to allow for this, the complex nuances of African nonmodern relational onto-epistemologies must be recognised and provided for (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 03). In this regard, the pragmatic understanding of *domesticity* provides another opening for academic consideration.

4.3.4. Domesticated Agency

Based on Amos Tutuola's narrative descriptions, Nyamnjoh presents agency as domesticated when it "stresses negotiation, interconnectedness and harmony" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 201) and aligns the interests of individuals with the expectations of the group. Domesticated agency also allows for the sharing of common interests between human and nonhumans agents (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 201). In an understanding of the world that embraces incompleteness, the "mentalities and practices of absolutes and conquest" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04) becomes less urgent, and conviviality in the form of domesticated relations is given priority.

When it comes to the study of religion, it is important to note that the category of domesticated agent potentially applies to all agents, not just the human ones. Nyamnjoh notes that agency is available to all persons, visible or invisible, *but not every agent is domesticated* (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04). Rather than the Eurocentric approach to invisible persons, which figures them either along Manichean lines of purely good or purely evil, or which denies any of them ontological agency at all, the African indigenous approach points to subtle and important distinctions within the relational domain where nonhuman and invisible agents emerge. Agency is only domesticated if it "emphasizes negotiation, concession and

conviviality" over individual gains (Nyamnjoh 2001, 31). Any agent, be they human or nonhuman, is called on to "de-emphasise or domesticate personal success and maximise collective endeavours" in response to the transience of the dynamic and incomplete world (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 04).

Within the African nonmodern, agents who are open to dynamic relations with each other have a way of discerning whether these relations can be convivial. The more focus on individual rights and needs, the less convivial the relationship will be. This does not negate the role, or the needs, of the individual. Rather, as the relational world is made from the shared endeavours of individuals, domesticated agency requires that the individuals' creativity, ability and power "be harnessed, in order to be acknowledged and provided for" (Nyamnjoh 2001, 31). As such, the process of domesticating agency allows for "negotiation, interconnectedness and harmony between individual interests and group expectations" (Nyamnjoh 2001, 31). To engage a convivial and domesticated stance in relation to the world provides for the possible synchronisation of individual and collective needs, not in a complete and final manner, but in the ongoing manner of continual, intimate, negotiation.

That said, neither Tutuola nor Nyamnjoh is making a case for African collectives living in uncomplicated peace and harmony. There is still conflict within social groups that aim for the convivial domestication of agency. In many cases, "opportunism and conflict are the products of inclusivity" (Nyamnjoh 2015, 84), and cannot be simply avoided. However, with the dynamic structure of domesticated agential relations, and the understanding of incompleteness, indigenous collectives have the tools to embrace the challenges that arise naturally within relational domains. From this perspective, the risk involved for agents who remain undomesticated comes to matter a great deal, as the nuanced relations involved in always-incomplete becomings are not amenable to protecting the solitary individual (Nyamnjoh 2015, 247).

The modern secular academy could benefit from recognition of African world-making practices, and the challenge these practices offer to current onto-epistemological hegemonies. If material formations, circulations and absences of domesticated agents where to be given a place in religious studies analysis, the field could open to a more inclusive basis of investigation. How are material formations of domesticated agency discerned within nonmodern and indigenous collectives? Are there circulations present within this material

dynamic, and if there are, how might one go about tracking them? Furthermore, what material absences become salient when analysing domesticated agency as a material dynamic? For a critically inclusive study of religion in the 21st century, these questions remain to be answered. To prepare for engaging these questions, critical scholars will need to move beyond the limits of the abyssal line instituted by theological and secular reasoning. In this regard, the work of Bruno Latour is of great value.

4.4. Beyond Abyssal Thinking

Bruno Latour's work on the nonmodern offers a valuable resource for discussing and integrating African onto-epistemologies without the need to embrace explicitly theological reasoning. That said, he does not approach or attempt to integrate endogenous nonmodern thinking into his philosophical model. Rather, as a modern critic of the modern project, he points to openings within modern conceptual structures where the construct of the nonmodern becomes relevant. By presenting the nonmodern alongside the modern as a legitimate and important aspect of the world, he lays the ground for more inclusive models of reality. However, in order to read the African nonmodern into Latour's presentation of the nonmodern, convivial scholarship is needed. This form of scholarship, inspired by African world-making practice, allows for multiple onto-epistemologies to matter in relation to each other. When engaging convivial scholarship, it becomes necessary for critical scholars to investigate, and ultimately deconstruct, the Christocentric category of the supernatural, along with the secular constructs of 'nature' and 'culture'. Latour already disrupts both nature and culture by reading the nonmodern between these constructs in the form of what he calls the Middle Kingdom, but he does not engage the many nuances that cohere within nonmodern forms of becoming, or discuss the myriad ways in which these could come to matter within global discourse.

4.4.1. Relational Networks

By presenting the nonmodern as an ontological category alongside the modern, Latour makes a strong case for the mattering of nonhuman and invisible agents. He deconstructs the modern project using the heuristic of the nonmodern, in which nonhuman agents abound. Through his focus on the efficacy and ontological validity of nonhuman agency, he is able to pry apart some of the more recalcitrant onto-epistemological commitments that characterise modernity.

Latour theorises that the modern project is structured by a bifurcation between the process of what he calls *translation* and *purification* (Latour 1993, 10-11). By translation, he means the emergence of "entirely new types of beings" within the nonmodern as a middle space between nature and culture (Latour 1993, 10). By purification, he means the modern process of distinguishing humans from nonhumans (Latour 1993, 10-11). He suggests that translation occurs continually within the relational networks of agents that people the world, and purification insists on creating "two entirely distinct ontological zones" for the resultant human and nonhumans persons that emerge (Latour 1993, 11). Latour argues that the modern project relies on the total separation of translation from purification, and this results in the slicing of "delicate networks" of entangled phenomena "into tidy compartments" (Latour 1993, 02). He goes on to suggest that the modern unwillingness to account for the reality of the nonmodern, which results in acknowledging only some (closely ratified) nonhuman agents, leads to an overabundance of unacknowledged agents within modern collectives (Latour 1993, 12).

One of the primary categories that have been excluded from critical religious studies investigation is that of nonhuman or more-than-human agents, and the material formations, circulations, absences that allow these agents to matter within modern and nonmodern spaces. In contemporary philosophical discussions of the nonhuman, attention lies on the physical nonhuman agents that are the subject of secular new materialisms. This discourse focuses on physical and visible entities, the objects and animals that have been denied agential capacity through the Cartesian deadening of the world. My focus, however, is on the invisible and more-than-human agents that populate indigenous onto-epistemologies. In some key regards, Latour's nonmodern opens the discussion towards an analysis of these agents.

When focusing on the mattering of other-than-human peoples, Latour points to nonmodern collectives, which 'devote themselves' to conceiving of and monitoring relations with these agents. He argues that by overseeing and explicitly acknowledging dynamic relations with nonhuman and invisible agents, their over-proliferation is prevented (Latour 1993, 12). Latour also argues that the proliferation of unacknowledged nonhuman agents within modern spaces creates problems for working with social, political, and ecological complexities, and he suggests that the modern project is "going to have to slow down, reorient and regulate" these

agents by “representing their existence officially” (Latour 1993, 12). As it is human policy that “defines humans and nonhumans, their properties and their relations, their abilities and their groupings” (Latour 1993, 15), Latour suggests that modern collectives have the option to allow for all manner of agents, and so to oversee the material relations whereby these agents come to matter.

During the Enlightenment era, scholars ushered in modernity by conceiving of nonhuman agents as “hybrids” made from “illegitimate mixtures” of nature and culture, which they needed to “purify by separating natural mechanisms from human passions, interests or ignorance” (Latour 1993, 35). The reduction of the world to either nature or culture shaped colonial onto-epistemologies, where indigenous collectives were “accused of making a horrible mishmash of things and humans, of objects and signs, while their accusers finally separated them totally” (Latour 1993, 39). In doing so, the modern project made the existence of multiple other-than-human agents “invisible, unthinkable” and “unrepresentable” (Latour 1993, 39). Latour argues that the result of this erasure is a modern collective that can expand in size past any nonmodern collective, as it does not have to put very much labour towards the monitoring of relations with other-than-human agents.

While this may seem like a useful adaptation, it does not stop the material effects of nonhuman agents within modern society. Rather, it ensures the “expanded proliferation” of these agents, “whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies” (Latour 1993, 34). Latour argues that modern collectives grow disproportionately by ignoring the middle space between nature and culture, which he calls the Middle Kingdom, and where he locates the nonmodern domain. Instead of acknowledging this vibrant and fertile space, moderns see it as “a no man's-land, a nonplace” (Latour 1993, 96). As a result, modernity’s willful ignorance of the role that humans play in organizing relations with nonhumans has led to ecological, political, and social catastrophes.

To counter these catastrophes, Latour suggests that it is necessary to “trace both the modern dimension and the nonmodern dimension” (Latour 1993, 77), and to acknowledge that all collectives “are similar in that they simultaneously construct humans, divinities and nonhumans” (Latour 1993, 106). To understand this better, it’s necessary to understand Latour’s theory of the *networks* that make up the Middle Kingdom, between the poles of nature and culture, where other-than-modern collectives generate meaning.

For Latour, relational networks are “simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society” (Latour 1993, 06). The human world takes shape in this networked middle space, by way of mediation and translation. In Latour’s understanding, there are only “networks, agents” and “actants”, and no “pure matters” or “pure mechanical forces” (Latour 1993, 128). Within the space between nature and culture, “spirits and agents, gods and ancestors” (Latour 1993, 128) blend into each other, and even the human “does not possess a stable form” (Latour 1993, 137). When this is taken into consideration, the human can no longer be conceived as “a constitutional pole to be opposed to that of the nonhuman” (Latour 1993, 137). As such, he suggests that “the principle for classifying entities” within modern discourse needs change, to acknowledge “the illegitimate multitudes” of other-than-human agents that impact human relations (Latour 1993, 77). Part of this would entail restoring a “mediating role to all the agents” (Latour 1993, 78), not just humans. I suggest that for this process to be possible, convivial scholarship in necessary.

4.4.2. Convivial Scholarship

Scholarship as a convivial process does not promote an exclusionary view of the human, as modern humanism does. It also does not insist on a single understanding of how to live a “good life” (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 06), as secular discourse often does. Instead, it opens to the intricate negotiations of lived experience, abandoning the quest for a noncontradictory version of reality (McCall 1995, 266). Within academic discourse, there arises a need for ways to accept a world with multiple truths, without the reduction of this plethora to modern categorical distinctions. With this in mind, Nyamnjoh notes that there is a “scarcity of conviviality in universities and among the disciplines” (Nyamnjoh 2020, 24) due to the ongoing hegemony around knowledge production. For scholars to engage convivial relations within the academy, the onto-epistemologies that have been made absent through the construction of the abyssal line would require integration into the academic project.

> Convivial scholarship recognises the deep power of collective imagination and the importance of interconnections and nuanced complexities. It is a scholarship that sees the local in the global and the global in the local by bringing them into informed conversations, conscious of the hierarchies and power relations at play at both the micro and macro levels of being and

> becoming. Convivial scholarship is scholarship that neither dismisses a priori nor throws the baby out with the bathwater. (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 267)

In their discussion of the 'politics of conviviality', Hinchliffe and Whatmore suggest that conviviality as a practice is concerned with a "more broadly conceived accommodation of difference" and "better attuned to the comings and goings of the multiplicity of more-than-human inhabitants" that people the world (Hinchliffe & Whatmore 2006, 125). When engaging scholarship as a convivial endeavour, the goal is not to find final answers, but to allow for ever-present questioning (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 267).

This might involve being both "porous" and "buffered", open to "a world of spirits, powers and cosmic forces" and also "disenchanted" enough to explore individual moral orders (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 08). As an example of this, Nyamnjoh points to contemporary Africans who exist as "frontier beings", straddling the "crossroads and junctions of multiple influences and possibilities" and emerging with a vision that allows for the possibility of continuous innovation (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 28). Nyamnjoh presents frontier Africans as those who are interested in "conversations not conversions" and embrace a world where "everyone and everything is malleable, flexible and blendable, from humans and their anatomies, to animals and plants, gods, ghosts and spirits" (Nyamnjoh 2017a, 258). In this regard, the contemporary African nonmodern is not exclusionary, but intrinsically inclusive.

Is it possible for the critical study of religion to engage the nonmodern by structuring the study of religion as a convivial form of scholarship? This would involve accounting for, and integrating, multiple onto-epistemologies, which may disrupt the core values of both the modern and the secular project. Is a convivial study of religion possible within the modern academy? The convivial approach takes seriously the reunion of ontology and epistemology. More than just an epistemological modality, convivial scholarship is also an ontological engagement. The convivial scholar responds to the assertion that knowing and being are not separate. In the cosmos that emerges from knowing-in-being, egalitarian forms of engagement become practical prerequisites for sustainable outcomes.

With a focus on conviviality, might religious studies scholars be equipped to navigate a critically inclusive enquiry into religion on a global scale? In my understanding, a valuable entry point for beginning this process would be the study of material interactions between

humans and invisible agents. It befalls the convivial scholar to transgress the abyssal line, and draw attention to agents that are otherwise reduced to nonexistence within critical religious studies discourse.

4.4.3. Allowing for What Matters

Graham Harvey notes that "indigenous life is organized around the existence of persons, human and otherwise" (Harvey 2014, 38). Amazonian shamans "adopt the perspective of nonhuman subjectivities in order to administer the relations between humans and nonhumans" (de Castro 2004, 468) within their communities. Amongst the Matsigenka people of the Amazon basin, there are numerous highly structured reciprocal relations between "humans and spirit beings" (Rosengren 2006, 807). In Mongolia, indigenous collectives use the term *üzegdeh-güi yum* (invisible things) to refer to the collective world of spirits and ghosts (Delaplace 2014, 54). These invisible agents make themselves known to the Dörvöd of north-western Mongolia "through the actions they perform" (Delaplace 2014, 62), not through conceptual structures or religious beliefs.

The Toba people of the Argentinean Chaco work with "entities, that, although not human, possess an intentionality capable of directing and exerting actions on the world and on human beings" (Tola 2014, 71). Amongst African indigenous collectives, ancestors, and nonhuman agents in the form of animals, spirits, and plants, inform the ongoing development of world-making practices. In the Gwembe valley of Southern Zambia, *masabe* spirits inflict illnesses on individuals, in order to make their agency known. *Masabe* invisible persons, in the form of the ancestors, communicate their needs through this affliction, and "want to be recognised as partners in a relationship which changes from subjugation to mutual reciprocity when it is successful" (Luig 1999, 129). When other-than-human agents are recognised as real (in as much as they come to *matter*) a new conceptual apparatus and new technologies of engagement, are required for continued analysis.

The mattering of spirits and other nonhuman persons within nonmodern practice provides a site of enquiry for the contemporary study of religion. Turning to the third-position as a heuristic domain beside both world-religion and secular practice, the conceptual apparatus provided by contemporary nonmodern collectives offers a wealth of information for the critical scholar. Frameworks shaped by inherent relationality generate technologies of mattering that require further attention in the critical study of religion.

David Chidester, who argues that phenomena are to be treated as material if they have a material impact on the world, has paved the way for a more inclusive study of religious practice. Although he does not address the role of invisible agents within his most recent discussions of dynamic material, the lenses he presents form coherent and valuable resources for the analysis of more-than-human and other-than-human persons. Critical posthuman theorist Karen Barad writes that "the world is an open process of mattering through which mattering itself acquires meaning and form through the realization of divergent agential possibilities" (Barad 2007, 141). While she too overlooks the role of invisible agents in the making of the world, the conceptual apparatus she presents provides a theoretical framework which might allow for the persons implicated in religious and spiritual practice. Both Chidester and Barad, in this regard, provide coherent non-theological means for investigating the mattering of invisible persons.

That said, the indigenous approach to relations with invisible and nonhuman persons has always been fundamentally material, in as much as reciprocal relations between agents are established through material structures and outcomes. Before the expansive materiality provided by theorists like Chidester and Barad, indigenous and nonmodern collectives were already working within realms of mattering that were not prescribed by Cartesian reductions. The onto-epistemological basis of relationality that extends beyond the human is a core feature of indigenous world-making practice. On a global scale, this comes to matter in the formation and legitimation of the third-position, which is neither world-religion nor secular reason. Invisible agents have always mattered within indigenous collectives, and the turn that I am suggesting in the study of religion would recognise and respond to that.

Only by transgressing the secular bounds of the natureculture continuum could scholars begin to make sense of the permeable relations between humans and nonhumans that characterise the nonmodern position. A passage from Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) illustrates the porosity of substance and identity that is present in so many indigenous world-making practices.

> But as any ghost could run faster than any earthly person, so that I became tired before him, and when he was about to catch me or when his hand was touching my head slightly to catch it, then I used the juju which I took from the hidden place that he kept it in before we left his house. And at that same

> moment that I used it, it changed me to a cow with horns on its head … but I forgot before I used it that I did not know another juju which he was using before changing me back to an earthly person. Of course as I changed to a cow I became more powerful and started to run faster than him, but still, he was chasing me until he became tired. (Tutuola 1954, 42)

What contingencies of nature or productions of culture are able to sufficiently account for the protagonists' use of juju to change into an animal form? Or to account for the ghost that was chasing him? While 'imagination' forms a category that could be sufficiently delimited by natureculture, what forms of reduction and exclusion accompany this term? European scholars when first encountering Tutuola's work lauded his "poetic imagination" (Lindfors 1975, 09). Along with the conceptual apparatus provided by the term 'belief', the western construct of 'imagination' renders abyssal any forms of agential relation that transgress secular mores. In order to account for nonmodern world-making practices *in nonmodern terms*, modern onto-epistemological supremacy must be disrupted. This is possible without resorting to Christian theological onto-epistemologies. It is also possible without relying on the modern onto-epistemology that supports the omnipotence of secular human reason.

In my understanding, a bridge between modern and nonmodern onto-epistemologies can be formulated through Chidester's approach to materiality, which is already resonant with indigenous world-making practices. Chidester's material approach allows for significant attention to be paid to unworlded practices. The material is that which comes to matter. Nothing more, nothing less. Unworlded-religions matter, and can be studied through the dynamic material lens.

In Tutuola's narrative, it matters that he used 'juju' to transform into a cow, and thereby escape the ghost who was chasing him. Rather than curious imaginings, anachronisms, or cases of mistaken reasoning, indigenous forms of world-making present an intrinsic aspect of material human practice. The coming to matter of invisible and nonhuman agents, within both modern and nonmodern realms of practice, might form the basis for a study of religion that is no longer hedged in by Christian prerogatives, and no longer relies on the categorical distinctions made between religion, secularity, nature, or culture. Were the material domain to expand to include the understandings that cohere within indigenous practice, the field of religious studies might open to *postabyssal* thinking, and thereby begin to address the racial

and colonial exclusions that are still so prevalent within the academy today. When nonmodern relationality is figured as material, the bounds of modern scholarship expand to account for and engage indigenous approaches to personhood and the making of persons. Traditions and practices that were unworlded by the colonial project might emerge as a significant material domain.

4.4.4. The Making of Persons

Donna Haraway has argued that "kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans" (Haraway 2015, 161). For Haraway the making of kin is a fundamental aspect of "the dynamic ongoing sym-chthonic forces and powers of which people are a part" (Haraway 2015, 160)[38]. In a cosmos where "more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (Haraway 2015, 160) all engage in dynamic ways, the process of kin-making allows formidable patterns of relation to emerge.

This important observation informs my thinking on the critically inclusive study of religion. In this section I am using the term 'kin' to refer to a specific form of world-making, that which involves the mattering of persons through reciprocal relation. Although this term has historically been adopted (and rejected) by the modern academy in reference to indigenous social practices, I will argue that Haraway's use of the term kin-making provides an important conceptual intervention.

French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908 – 2009) published his book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* in 1949, which detailed kin structures in indigenous and non-Western societies. He discussed kinship practice as fundamentally a social phenomenon, rather than a biological one. For most of the 20th century, it was generally accepted that all societies engaged kinship systems (Leaf & Read 2020, 01). Complex systems of kinship in different collectives were mapped exhaustively, while being continually contested within the growing discipline of anthropology. Overarching principles of kin relation, as examples of both

[38] Haraway calls this dynamic "ongoingness" the Chthulucene, which is made up of the entanglement of multiple "temporalities and spatialities" (Haraway 2015, 160).

nature and culture, were an ongoing source of debate for social scientists as the 20th century progressed.

This changed in 1987, when David Schneider published *A Critique of the Study of Kinship.* In this text, he points to the hegemonic construction of terms like “kinship, economics, politics, and religion” (Schneider 1987, 181) as “metacultural categories embedded in European culture which have been incorporated into the analytic schemes of European social scientists” (Schneider 1987, 184). Schneider suggested that “kinship is not universal; it is not objective; it may not even be real” (Leaf & Read 2020, 02). In an attempt to reject kinship studies entirely as a field of enquiry, Schneider argued that “there are other ways of constituting the units out of which a society or culture is fabricated” (Schneider 1987, 184) and suggested that scholars “first establish the units which the particular culture itself marks off” (Schneider 1987, 184). This deconstruction of studies which focused on kin structure was indicative of late 20th century critical and reflexive turns in the social sciences. Due to this critical deconstruction, studies of kin relations have fallen out of favour in current scholarship.

However, Leaf and Read suggest that Schneider was wrong in some key regards. They argue that kinship can still be seen as universal if scholars engage kinship analysis with acceptance of the dynamic and unique systems within each collective (Leaf & Read 2020, 03). Furthermore, they argue that not all scholarship engaged kin analysis in a problematic fashion. In response to the late 20th century deconstruction of kin as a category, American cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1930 – 2021) suggested a re-development of the term. He argued that kinship can be viewed as "mutuality of being" (Sahlins 2013, ix) rather than formal categories of relation according to Western mores.

> In contrast to our own native wisdom and an anthropological science that for too long has been indebted to it, kinship categories are not representations or metaphorical extensions of birth relations; if anything, birth is a metaphor of kinship relations. (Sahlins 2013, ix)

Sahlins argued for moving beyond the modern appropriation and rejection of kinship as an empirical structure. He suggested that “kin folk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other's existence; they are members of one another” (Sahlins 2013, ix). As such, he

explored the process of kin-making as an ontological process, fundamental to the making of the world.

For the purposes of my thesis, kin as 'mutuality of being' can perhaps be better understood as 'mutuality of becoming', allowing for the dynamic and incomplete relations that structure the world. Donna Haraway also proposes a holistic and inherently relational use of the word.

> My purpose is to make "kin" mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy. The gently defamiliarizing move might seem for a while to be just a mistake, but then (with luck) appear as correct all along. Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans. (Haraway 2015, 161)

From the nonmodern perspective, just as nature is not essentially separate from culture, so too is natureculture not separate from the making of porous persons through relation. As discussed in previous chapters, indigenous and nonmodern worlds are characterised by reciprocal relations which extend to multiple other-than-human agents. This kin-making process enables a world of relations beyond both secular and theological limits.

Marilyn Strathern, in her discussion of the indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea, observes that "agency is evinced in the ability of persons to (actively) orient themselves or to align themselves with particular relationships" (Strathern 2004, 225). To further illustrate the relational making of persons within indigenous collectives, Irving Hallowell records the following interaction with a member of the Canadian Ojibwa community.

> Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are all the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while and then replied, "No! But some are". (Hallowell 1960, 24)

In as much as persons are made through relations, those parts of the world that do not offer relational potential are not perceived as persons. The Nayaka of south India also distinguish between stones that are persons, and those that are not. A stone that is a person is noted as 'coming towards' and 'jumping into' the relational spaces that the Nayaka inhabit (Harvey 2005, 106). The difference between the stones who are identified as persons, and those that are not, comes through human reciprocal relations with the stone. Commenting on the

Nayaka, Graham Harvey notes that “persons demonstrate to one another that they are persons by acting towards one another” (Harvey 2005, 106). This relational becoming of persons is the basis for the many nonhuman and invisible agents that emerge within nonmodern spaces. Persons come to matter through multiple relations. As discussed briefly in Chapter 2, the Southern African principle of *ubuntu* describes the same process, with the maxim that people become people through relations with each other.

This form of agency is pragmatic, experiential, and materially dynamic. Conceptions of agency that rest on experience and intimate relation, and which allow for the incomplete nature of all world-making practices, can be highly disruptive to the legal and social frameworks that sustain the modern project. As such, these forms of relational agency have been explicitly unworlded, made abyssal in an attempt to protect the limits that shape modern socio-political stability.

4.4.5. Disruptive Relations

The term ‘disrupt’ means to "break or burst asunder"[39]. Indigenous and nonmodern forms of personhood have long proved disruptive to the buffering of the modern individual, and following this, to the making of contractual obligations under modern law. Personhood in modern nation-states is conditional, and relies on the ability to enter into a contract according to legal requirements (Sattar 2021, 78). Humans become persons only after attaining this pre-condition, which rests on the rational capacity of the human in question (Sattar 2021, 78). Humans considered to be of unsound mind are barred from entering into contracts, which effectively excludes them from the rights given to legal persons (Sattar 2021, 80)[40].

As legal personhood rights rely on the ability to enter into legal contracts, the notion that persons can be made to matter through subjective reciprocal relations, and formalised through experiential pragmatics, finds little purchase in modern discourse. The development of modern forms of agency results in “the final ascendance of the contractually capacitated, unambiguously embodied, self-aware, rationally wilful, and morally self-regulating individual”

[39] “Disruption.” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed on 12 June 2022, (https://www.etymonline.com/word/disruption)

[40] The rights of legal persons, which are highly conditional, are different from the rights of humans, which currently require only biological status as homo-sapiens.

(Palmié 2014, 229). This modern construction has become so normalised that agency cohering through intimate relation is generally considered "madness, unnatural dependency, or utter cultural incommensurability" (Palmié 2014, 228). However, it is important to note that the rational and autonomous modern agent is relatively new on the world stage (Palmié 2014, 229).

Modern forms of agency rely on "an epistemology precipitated by, and predicated on" (Palmié 2014, 221) the *colonisation of history*, in which a linear narrative is superimposed on a dynamic and incomplete past. In this narrative, the past is parcelled off from the present and becomes a fixed location on which to pin the legal structures that uphold current claims to property and individual autonomy. This "serial continuum of linear time" (Palmié 2014, 221) functions to maintain modern hegemonies, and continues to give shape to abyssal exclusions. Tied to the "emergence of a particular political project" (Palmié 2014, 230), the historical narrative constructs an "unbridgeable gap" (Palmié 2014, 232) between the past and the present, which also serves to maintain the abyssal line between modern and nonmodern onto-epistemologies.

Historian Constantin Fasolt argues that the modern distinction between past and present is "an act of self-determination" by which modern individuals are constructed as autonomous (Fasolt 2004, 14–15). This form of structuring the world "remains beholden, not just methodologically but epistemologically, to the terms of a set of North Atlantic particulars that have paraded as human universals since the second half of the eighteenth century" (Palmié 2014, 219). Modern agreements around agency serve as a barrier to integrating nonmodern forms of agency, which are neither wholly autonomous nor fixed according to contractual obligations.

For instance, within indigenous spaces, the agency of the ancestors is made present through divination and through materialisation of the ancestors in the bodies of diviners. In this regard, the past is made present, and does not lie still. This radically disrupts "the notion of an objective (and objectifiable) past irreversibly sealed off" from the present moment (Palmié 2014, 223). As such, allowing ancestors to speak into the present "would seem to contaminate the present with the past" (Palmié 2014, 225) and fundamentally disrupts notions of modern autonomy.

In African nonmodern collectives, the ancestors as agential beings are in constant relation with human agents. According to sociologist Asonzeh Ukah, “it is impossible to grasp the religious foundations of the African worldview without understanding the role and place of ancestors” (Ukah 2016, 54). As with the invisible corporate agents that proliferate in modern spaces, the ancestors as invisible agents have many roles and responsibilities within African collectives, and “constitute a principal strand in the daily organisation and administration of families and communities” (Ukah 2016, 54). They stand beside other invisible agents comprising a world that is “very densely populated with spiritual beings” (Ige 2006, 26). They are made to matter through ongoing religio-socio-political relations. Ancestors have rights to land (McCall 1995, 256), and have an important voice within the collectives that engage them (Amponsah 1975, 86).

In order to maintain convivial relations with the ancestors, human mediators work to “appease them when they are provoked to anger” (Ige 2006, 27), and offer them “great respect, admiration and awe” (Ige 2006, 28) for the roles they play. This does not guarantee that the ancestors, as individual agents, will behave in a domesticated manner. They “can be conceived of as good or bad according to the fulfilment of certain criteria” (Ukah 2016, 53), and humans work hard to remain on good terms with these powerful invisible entities. However, there is a general understanding that they are “interested in the welfare of their living descendant(s)” (Amponsah 1975, 86), which gives human agents the potential to establish convivial relations of mutual benefit, should conditions allow.

Allowing the ancestors to matter in the material present undermines the “cultural conventions of political self-legitimation in modern nation states” (Greenhouse 1996, 02) and as such, is avoided through totalising erasure. In this regard, the “deep collusion between ‘history’ and the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship” (Chakrabarty 2000, 41) continues to relegate nonmodern people-making practices to the abyssal side of the line. In terms of South African history, the native laws that were drawn up by colonial authorities were presented as a written account of African custom, but completely overlooked the role of the ancestors within African socio-religio-political dynamics. This body of written laws became the basis for the state based acknowledgement of African ‘customary’ practices, which even today does not account for the role of the ancestors in the material dynamics of African collectives.

While the challenges that indigenous and nonmodern forms of agency pose to the political project of modernity are not easily overcome, this should not preclude a thorough examination of the political dynamics that keep the current hegemonies in place. The historical reasoning that underlies the construction of the modern and autonomous individual banishes nonmodern forms of personhood to the abyss, but has never effectively eradicated these dynamic agents. Rather, they continue to "haunt" the present "in the form of a past that does not go away, because it refuses historical objectification" (Palmié 2014, 236)[41]. How could the critical study of religion respond to this hegemonic construction of agency, and account for the persons it excludes?

Rather than unproblematically accepting the secular onto-epistemological framework that renders these agents entirely invisible, critical scholars of religion have the opportunity to revise the frameworks used to understand the reciprocal relations that comprise personhood beyond the human.

4.5. A Critically Inclusive Study of Religion

For the critical study of religion to move beyond the closures precipitated by secular reason, the natureculture continuum needs to expand to include the onto-epistemological relevance of indigenous person-making practices. To make this feasible, relationality must be acknowledged as a material form of engagement, and allowed to matter beyond the secular limits of nature and culture. Through the lenses provided by nonmodern writers and thinkers, the material religion project can move beyond abyssal limits, and apply already established methodologies in ways that allow for the mattering of indigenous practices.

In some key ways, critical theory itself needs updating. Currently it accepts secular limits as unproblematic, and is therefore unable to apply critical analysis to its own formation. This can change with a turn to postabyssal critical theory, which may show that secularity in

[41] For more on *hauntology* see Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) where he discusses that which is "neither living nor dead, present nor absent" (Derrida 1994, 63). Karen Barad applies this concept in a posthuman context by discussing the hauntological characteristic of material entanglements (Barad 2010).

scholarship may not have "self-evident" (Foucault 1980, 155) justifications. In this regard "flushing out" of errors in thinking and practice remains paramount (Foucault 1980, 154).

4.5.1. Expanding the Continuum

I have argued that by collapsing the separate constructs of nature and culture into a continuum, the modern limits inscribed by the former dichotomy have not been sufficiently transgressed. The domain of nature, long taken to be comprised of soulless material, and the domain of culture, referring to human practices constituted by rational means, are both reflective of the modern onto-epistemological agreement. This agreement, at its heart, is secular. Even those critical scholars who would combine the two, and thereby undo the dichotomy, still cleave to secular limits in terms of their thinking. Natureculture, as a continuum, allows space for dynamic material analysis, and the deconstruction of Cartesian mores, but it does not allow for the mattering of the unworlded onto-epistemologies that cohere on the abyssal side of the line.

While the existence of both nature and culture is now understood to be a conceptual heuristic rather than an immutable fact, heuristics are still useful for drawing attention. The heuristic of nature helps to describe the dynamics of physicality, and the heuristic of culture helps to describe the dynamics of social groupings. What heuristics are available for explicating the relational making of persons as an onto-epistemological matter? The conceptual apparatus of natureculture allows no opening to indigenous onto-epistemologies that transgress modern material theory and modern discourse on semiosis. To remedy this, I suggest that an opening be inserted into natureculture, reflecting unworlded religious traditions around the globe. The opening would reflect a third position that is neither nature nor culture, and does not resort to either of these constructions in order to make sense of the world.

This opening is already described in some detail by Bruno Latour's nonmodern, which he calls the Middle Kingdom. In the Middle Kingdom, relational agents abound, and have material impact despite modern refusals to acknowledge their presence. That said, Latour's nonmodern is simply situated *between* the poles of nature and culture, and this may not be sufficient for the opening that is required when attempting onto-epistemological redress. A position in the middle of the natureculture continuum is still functionally prescribed by the onto-epistemology of 'nature' and 'culture', and might not allow a coherent third position to

emerge. To feasibly integrate the nonmodern into the modern academy, the conceptual apparatus of natureculture itself needs to be expanded.

The expansion of this modern category might bring the modern academy in line with nonmodern collectives, for whom the distinctions between nature and culture have never been particularly relevant. Indigenous world-making practices are not bounded by the secular nature of the natureculture continuum, which currently replaces the former dichotomy. Where do Tutuola's ghosts and spirits fit into the natureculture continuum? They are not mere products of culture, nor simply contingencies of nature. They take place beyond the natureculture continuum, in acknowledgement of an incomplete cosmos which cannot be described by complete categories. The continuum described by natureculture offers a postmodern category that claims status as a complete and totalising heuristic. As such, it does not speak for nor provide for nonmodern sensibilities.

James Cox notes that "amongst indigenous peoples, kinship rules religion; it defines its fundamental characteristic and dictates the one belief all Indigenous Religions share in common" (Cox 2007, 69). In recognition of the third position, which is neither religious nor secular, neither nature nor culture, and neither simply material nor semiotic, I suggest considering the making of kin as a fundamental aspect of human reality, eclipsed within modern collectives but still actively engaged within the nonmodern. Fundamentally exceeding the natureculture continuum, person-making as a heuristic that takes the nonmodern into account forms part of what I am calling the *natureculturekin* continuum. By adding the third term to this modern construction, scholars might move beyond the myopic lens that nature and culture form when these former dichotomies are collapsed.

In the exclusive humanist view, the buffered human is considered to exist as both a natural and a cultural entity. Separate entities relate from places of relative or absolute autonomy, and relations within both the natural and the cultural domain constitute the ongoing identity of the modern individual. By adding the domain of kin-making beside nature and culture, the fundamental structure of the dichotomy is altered. So too is the conception of the human who is constituted only through natural and cultural developments. Natureculturekin disrupts the modern hegemony on what matters, by inserting the vivid material presence of onto-epistemological kin-relations, thereby adding a dimension of freedom to the constricted natureculture continuum.

The making of the world happens through the development of nature relations, culture relations and kin relations. With natureculturekin as a conceptual apparatus, critical religious studies scholarship might respond to Nyamnjoh's invitation to pay greater attention to "the interconnections, hierarchies and gradations that spring from and are consolidated by the ever-evolving messiness of lived experiences that continually reconfigure human reality" (Nyamnjoh 2017b, 225). The making of persons through relation is neither culture nor nature, but something definitively other, while also being deeply entangled with both. With salience given to relational kin-making as a mode of practice intrinsic to the ongoing generation of the world, a nonmodern conceptual apparatus becomes foundational for a coherent account of reality.

The Latin etymology of the word relation, meaning to 'bring back', bears relevance to the debate. What is it that is 'brought back' in relation? In a world constructed only through nature and culture, the material-semiotic subject only brings back material or semiotic entities. Personhood in this model remains constrained by the agentic closures of secular reasoning. However, in nonmodern frameworks, *people* are 'brought back' through relation. The making of the world in nonmodern spaces involves the ongoing generation of *personhood*, in ways far more complex and relevant than the modern academy can account for.

> Communication here *makes* boundaries, it defines borders between entities; it is not conditioned or created by them. Relations make things, people, entities, and technologies. (Espírito Santo & Hunter 2021, 244)

Activist for Native American rights, Vine Victor Deloria Jr, writes that relationships make up the world, in a universe "that people experience as alive and not as dead or inert" (Deloria 1990, 34). Australian indigenous activist, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, writes that the origin stories of her people "emanate from and connect us as humans and nonhumans through relations and kin to all that Mother Earth and our creators made" (Moreton-Robinson 2020, 259). Anthropologist Sarah Jackson, notes that for the Classic Mayan people, "personhood fundamentally does not require humans as a source, acting instead as an untethered resource that is accessed by entities (human or not) that are able to act in social, relational ways" (Jackson 2019, 32). It can be said that indigenous holistic relationality "functions through the logics of relativity finding expression in kin relations, respect, responsibility and obligation"

(Moreton-Robinson 2020, 259). African indigenous knowledge systems are also characterised by "complex kinship systems of relationships among people, animals, the earth and the cosmos from which knowing emanates" (Mawere 2011, 60). From the nonmodern indigenous viewpoint, the ability to act in relational ways is what *comprises a person*. This unworlded onto-epistemological understanding demands a presence within the modern academy, especially considering that the making of persons who are not human is a practice common in both modern and nonmodern spaces. However, due to the unworlding of nonmodern practices in general, only legally sanctioned nonhuman persons are considered legitimate within modern onto-epistemological boundaries.

Corporations and nation-states are both invisible agents that are comprised through relation, but these forms of relational agency are closely ratified by modern political and economic structures. In as much as the modern project is willing to endorse nonhuman persons, and to ascribe meaningful action to them, the generative domain of person-making also matters as a fundamental world-making practice within modern collectives. Yet relational agents not ratified by modern legislation continue to be made abyssal, in a hegemonic hold on reality that perpetuates colonial violence within 21st century discourse.

For a critically inclusive study of religion in the 21st century, it is crucial to consider the world-making strategies that involve relations with other-than-human persons on the abyssal side of the line. The move from natureculture to natureculturekin might constitute a move beyond abyssal divisions, and towards a redress of historical and current exclusions. For this to be feasible, a closer look at the making of persons is required.

4.5.2. Relation Matters

In Chapter 3 I discussed the 'invention of belief' as a modern way of casting doubt on the facticity of the lived experience. I noted that Descartes' method of doubting lived experience resulted in the relational complexities engaged by the human body no longer mattering to the case at hand. Bruno Latour famously wrote that "as the wave of colonization advances, the world fills up with believers. A Modern is someone who believes that others believe" (Latour 2010, 02). With this in mind, the material reductions associated with the term belief require further examination.

As previously discussed, the European concept of belief normalises the onto-epistemological closures that are fundamental to the modern project. This hegemonic conceptual apparatus originated in Europe, and its current usage can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther's Reformation of Roman Catholicism can be characterised by the five *Solas: sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura, solus Christus,* and *sola Deo gloria* (O'Callaghan 2017, 197). Translated, the *Solas* mean *faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, glory to God alone,* these onto-epistemological statements laid the foundation for Protestant reform of the Catholic cosmology that had dominated Europe for centuries.

In many ways, "the distinction between religion and magic had been blurred in the pre-Reformation church" (Scribner 1993, 475), despite the massive move against pagan practices carried out during the centuries of Crusades, and the many official edicts against divination and other pagan practices. While the Catholic Church had forbidden relations with deities other than those associated with the Christian God, the avenues for reciprocal relation between humans and more-than-human others were kept open through supplications to the saints (Parish 2015).

In Luther's version of Christianity, the human burden of sin was so great that no possible reciprocal relation existed between human and divine nonhuman (O'Callaghan 2017, 195). According to Luther's doctrine, the only opening to the domain of the more-than-human agency of God was to be found in the written scripture (Scribner 1993, 483). No relational openings existed in the world, apart from the relation of the reader to the text. By shifting the basic onto-epistemological framework for European religious world-making to faith-in-text rather than knowing-in-relation, Luther and his intellectual descendants instituted definitive foundations for the development of the abyssal line, with the term 'belief' performing a gate-keeping function.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Luther's reduction of human/God relations to the locus of the printed word. Luther reasoned that humans are marked by "the effect of the first sin" and are therefore unable to engage in any form of reciprocal relation with the Christian God (Luther, In Rom., WA 56, 482 in O'Callaghan 2017, 200). He goes on to deplore those who would desire reciprocal relations with God, as "depraved" and "perverse" (Luther, In Rom., WA 56, 482 in O'Callaghan 2017, 200). Only a diabolical human would ignore the "*peccatum in substantia"* (Luther, In Rom., WA 56, 482), the radical sin that rendered them incapable of

offering anything to the God, and therefore incapable of reciprocal relations with this ultimate more-than-human agent. As such, the notion of *sola gratia* (by grace alone), "changes the meaning of action in this world" (Lorca 2019, 94), rendering relational engagement with other-than-human agents inconceivable.

Australian historian, Ronald Scribner (1941 – 1988), writes that the "radical point of departure associated with Martin Luther" resides in his arguments around the "absolute sovereignty and otherness of God", which made it impossible for human beings "to gain any knowledge of the divine by merely created means" (Scribner 1993, 482). Through this reduction of agentic and relational potential, Luther redefined the Christian position (Scribner 1993, 476), and the conceptual apparatus associated with religion. Christian practice was altogether "freed of superstitious" notions about the workings of the world (i.e. freed from the possibility of relations with nonhuman agents) and instead "became a matter of internal conviction, enabling the rational human action characteristic of modernity" (Scribner 1993, 475). Internal conviction was not of a reciprocal nature, but was given only by the grace of God, and possible only through reading the sacred printed text.

In the process of wresting power from the Catholic Church, Protestant theologians moved Christian praxis to the internal space of the Cartesian *cogito*, overseen by the printed word, and removed entirely from embodied experience. Once religion became an internal affair, secular discourse ramped up its process of self-definition by claiming the Cartesian *res extensa* world as its domain of power. Religion (in the form of Protestant Christianity) and secular discourse (in the form of developing science and nation-state politics) laid claim to the two fundamental poles of the Cartesian framework and thereby dominated European discourse. Through this staking of claims and divisions, the whole of reality was divided up between European ideologues. In a conceptual presaging of the material practices played out during Europe's colonial era, the 'scramble for reality' that followed the Protestant Reformation, like the 'scramble for Africa' two centuries later, displayed an enormous hubris on the part of the European collective.

The abyssal reduction of human agency with regards to other-than-human relations, also known as the disenchantment of Europe, paved the way for future secular developments within European politics. The secular European nations that developed in the aftermath of

the Protestant Reformation displayed the same imperial processes of censure and erasure when it came to relations with the world of nonhuman agency.

In what follows, I demonstrate how applying Chidester's material lenses to the analysis of other-than-human agents, and the nuanced relations with the agents that cohere within nonmodern and indigenous spaces, might undo the onto-epistemological erasures associated with the introduction of the term belief. The purported objects of belief are material themselves, as are the relations that sustain them. In what ways do nonhuman agents rise to the level of materiality? How does the role of the other-than-human and more-than-human agent shift according to the religious formation they are part of? What material formations are impacted by the presence or lack of conviviality when nonhuman relations are engaged?

Notably, a formation is never in a complete state, the dynamics of complex systems guarantee this. If the focus is not on looking for complete formations, or static structures, scholars are more likely to observe the nuances inherent within incomplete processes, and allow for different forms of becoming to matter. Although Chidester alludes to this in his discussion of formations as dynamic boundary structures, this notion can be taken further, to help map more complex forms of relation, and thereby to allow for the mattering of nonmodern world-making practices. While Chidester has identified an intrinsic aspect of material formations in the push and pull that defines boundaries (Chidester 2018, 75) there is more to discern. With the idea of incomplete processes to guide the examination, scholars can look towards the relations of conviviality that exist within and around material religious formations. Are there any differences that matter between how modern and nonmodern religious formations engage conviviality? Does the explicit acknowledgment of incompleteness affect the material enactment of conviviality and non-conviviality in a religious context?

Once the enquiry into convivial relations has begun, scholars could look further into the role of domesticated agency. If there are religious formations that are less convivial, and/or more individual focused, does this necessarily equate to them being less domesticated, and therefore less agreeable to collective interests? How does the notion of the potential domestication of agency impact relations amongst human and nonhuman agents within modern and nonmodern religious formations?

Finally, the analysis of the *circulations* that arise within the material world of religion, also opens to further examination when considering incompleteness, conviviality, and

domesticated agency in relations with invisible agents. Chidester describes circulations by discussing the movements of material formations. Circulations are ebbs and flows that impact the relational dynamics between different formations. These dynamics can be mapped given the existing terms Chidester uses - mobility, diffusion, and oscillations (Chidester 2018, 135). Through modes of material circulation, formations filter through geographical space, and diffuse into each other as they move in both space and time.

Chidester's discussion of circulating religious formations draws focus to the "truism that there is nothing permanent but change" (Chidester 2018, 135). In this regard, his material approach opens to the African nonmodern in ways that resonate even before the explicit diffraction of nonmodern concepts into his work. In my understanding, there is nothing within Chidester's approach that would make it inimical to the consideration of nonmodern forms of relation once the limits of exclusive humanism have been dropped from the material project.

There is already a growing precedent amongst scholars to allow for relationality as fundamental to the academic project. Anthropologists Diana Espírito Santo and Jack Hunter, in *Mattering the Invisible* (2021), argue that communication through relation "defines borders between entities" rather than being "conditioned or created by them" (Espírito Santo & Hunter 2021, 244). As such, they acknowledge relation as the ground for making "things, people, entities, and technologies" (Espírito Santo & Hunter 2021, 244). In addition, the 'systems turn' in the physical and social sciences has resulted in scholars who are no longer enamoured with "unveiling the truth of the matter, or producing a singular account of the world" but acknowledge that human intervention in reality involves "the work of making things matter", a process founded in intrinsic relationality (Hinchliffe & Whatmore 2006, 124).

By allowing for the mattering and logics of relation as a third form of world-making beside the making of nature and culture, critical religious studies scholars might undo the imperialist bind that has been placed on the academy by exclusive humanist and secular imperatives. The colonial heritage of the bounded natureculture continuum is one that offers no new insights for further progress on the core issues that face religion studies. Examining natureculturekin as formative could provide the ground from which to draw new theory and praxis. The idea of relational kin-making as foundational alongside nature and culture provides an opening to theorising other-than-modern, and other-than-human becomings. However, this is only valuable if the onto-epistemological labour needed to integrate the

nonmodern is embraced. For this, Latour suggests that the 'scale of value' which defines the human needs to shift.

> The human is not a constitutional pole to be opposed to that of the nonhuman. The two expressions 'humans' and 'nonhumans' are belated results that no longer suffice to designate the other dimension. The scale of value consists not in shifting the definition of the human along the horizontal line that connects the Object pole to the Subject pole, but in sliding it along the vertical dimension that defines the nonmodern world. (Latour 1993, 137)

Humans around the globe engage worlds that "are performed and enacted through different forms of relationality and thus *become* real" (Espírito Santo and Hunter 2021, 04 italics in original). In what ways can these material relations be mapped, while allowing for the dynamic incompleteness that shapes all world-making processes? Considering person-making within the bounds of conviviality and domesticated agency, what material structures become apparent when a religious studies lens is brought to bear? Might an inclusive critical analysis of religion, which allows for the salience of multiple onto-epistemological frameworks, generate new opportunities for material redress?

4.5.3. Postabyssal Critical Theory

Critical scholarship is motivated by Foucault's call to flush out errors and engage the imperative task of transformation in the modern academy. The common goal of critical scholars is "to show that things are not as self-evident" (Foucault 1980, 155), thereby disrupting essential discourse, and provoking new political processes.

However, Boaventura de Sousa Santos notes that western critical theory developed to address problems faced by oppressed European citizenry, and therefore does not directly address the needs of oppressed people on a global scale (de Sousa Santos 2014, 40). For this reason, recognition of the abyssal line is missing from the Eurocentric critical model (de Sousa Santos 2007, 26). De Sousa Santos suggests that in order for critical theory to move beyond the strictures imposed by the abyssal line, "a radical break with modern Western ways of thinking and acting" is needed (de Sousa Santos 2007, 26).

> Such an epistemological reconstruction must start from the idea that hegemonic left thinking and the hegemonic critical tradition, in addition to

> being (or precisely because they are) North-centric, are colonialist, imperialist, racist, and sexist as well. (de Sousa Santos 2014, 42)

If critical scholars were to acknowledge and respond to the presence of the abyssal line, the critical tradition might be applied to analytical spaces that have been previously "ignored or made invisible" (de Sousa Santos 2014, 44). Those onto-epistemological positions "deemed nonexistent by the Eurocentric critical tradition" (de Sousa Santos 2014, 44) contain the knowledges that move modern thinking beyond violent hegemonic prerogatives. In this regard, the critical project could align itself with the need for redress on a global scale. De Sousa Santos calls this a move towards 'postabyssal thinking'.

> Postabyssal thinking … is a nonderivative thinking; it involves a radical break with modern Western ways of thinking and acting. In our time, to think in nonderivative terms means to think from the perspective of the other side of the line, precisely because the other side of the line has been the realm of the unthinkable in Western modernity. (de Sousa Santos 2014, 134)

In terms of the study of religion, the critical tradition moves towards postabyssal thinking by abandoning the limits of secular reason, which have long been considered one of the "most distinctive achievements of Western modernity" (de Sousa Santos 2014, 22). The modern critical project, while attempting to address ruptures and inconsistencies within the modern framework, needs to recalibrate in recognition of the abyssal line that shapes the mattering of the critical agenda. Religious studies offers a valuable domain for this reconfiguration to take shape. Considering the role that religious studies has played in the making of the modern world and the enactments of colonial logic, it might be that this splintered discipline is perfectly placed to lead the way for onto-epistemological redress within the academy at large.

4.6. Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that new conceptual apparatus can be found by turning to nonmodern scholarship. This could supplement the current ontological turn, and provide new lenses of analysis in the study of religion. Towards the dissolution of the abyssal line, I have proposed that the nonmodern is a cite of primary and foundational world-making. To signify the relevance of this world-making capacity, I have turned to what I am able to see of the

nonmodern. I have observed that the maintenance of reciprocal relations in the making of the world forms the basis of a onto-epistemological strategy that is used the world over.

Far from monolithic, the nonmodern domain I have sketched is more like a resonant material system, a strategically essentialised matrix of characteristics that generate a positive identity. The characteristics of holism, inter-relatedness and nonhuman agency described by Tutuola and Nyamnjoh resonate with nonmodern collectives the world over. In this regard, the version of the African nonmodern that I have explored forms part of a global nonmodern position. Not universal, never homogenous, but able to cohere an identity that rivals existing hegemonic structures.

The work of Amos Tutuola, and my guide to his work, Francis Nyamnjoh, have been invaluable in providing me with clues as to what the northern canon may hope to gain, should it open its onto-epistemological horizons. Tutuola's vivid rendering of West African folklore for English consumption offers a fertile ground for the critical material scholar of religion to explore the nuances involved within human to nonhuman relational dynamics. In addition, Nyamnjoh's analysis of Tutuola's work provides an important bridge to broad philosophical and practical resonances within African nonmodern spaces.

When reading the world-making practices presented by Tutuola and Nyamnjoh into the study of religion, it becomes clear that there are some profoundly problematic blind-spots within the northern canon. After taking note of the intrinsic relationality that supports reciprocal relations with nonhuman others, it becomes clear how fundamental this onto-epistemological process is within indigenous collectives across the globe. This generative capacity is conspicuously absent from current discourse, in as much as the academy cleaves to secular norms. In this regard, I have argued that the heuristic framework of natureculture is itself a secular construct that lacks inclusivity. In response, I have suggested that the natureculture continuum be expanded past its secular limits to include the making of kin. The resultant natureculturekin continuum allows for unworlded onto-epistemological practices to matter in contemporary academic discourse. Although these nonmodern practices have always mattered in the making of the world, the ways in which they have been *allowed* to matter within the modern research university have been decided by modern political agendas and modern colonial intellectual hegemonies.

In order to address the racial and colonial legacy of secular humanism, the critical theory that currently shapes the secular study of religion needs updating. There is a pressing need for critical theory and practice that allows for the investigation and eventual dissolution of the abyssal line. With new critical foci in place, the investigation of material absences becomes a priority. By engaging post-abyssal critical thinking, the study of religion makes space for inclusive scholarship. I have suggested that a critically inclusive study of religion, based on Chidester's material approach and informed by Nyamnjoh's nonmodern onto-epistemological criteria, might hold an important place alongside the other established disciplines in the modern academy.

THESIS CONCLUSION

The spaces I have mapped in this thesis span centuries. I have covered a lot of territory, from arguing for an emergent material method based on David Chidester's dynamic lenses, to critiquing posthuman exceptionalism, to engaging with postcolonial methodologies in tracking down absence. I have also tried to map some spaces-to-come. When secular onto-epistemologies are provincialised, nonmodern world-making practices lose their abyssal status, and the study of religion opens to include them.

From my position at the border of the northern canon, I have argued that the secular study of religion has modern limits that require critical attention. These limits can currently be seen in a core problem facing critical scholars - applying secular methodology to a theological object is still considered to be a form of theology. Initially, the quest to de-theologise religious studies was driven by the Protestant categories that shaped the first attempts at a science of religion. I tracked how each new generation of scholars attempts to move beyond this inherited theology by devising new frameworks. From taxonomies and comparison to phenomenology and semiotics, multiple secular methodologies have been applied within the non-theological study of religion, but each is ultimately found to be preserving a form of the theological object, and therefore not sufficiently secular. That said, rather than allowing the curtain to be drawn on the quest for devising a non-theological object of religion, some critical scholars have embraced the post-Cartesian dynamics of new material theory, which comprises a multi-disciplinary research agenda. In bringing mind back to matter, the question of religion comes into new focus. In David Chidester's work, dynamic material processes begin to cohere an object of study that cannot be said to rely on theological reasoning. Differing from other new material theorists in the study of religion, Chidester does not put his focus on the vibrance of physical objects, but instead presents a more dynamic definition of material matters.

The material of religion is 'that which comes to matter' to the case at hand. Mattering becomes a value that changes according to the context. This approach to materiality is mirrored in critical posthuman discourse, where the dynamic becoming of matter is an agentive and ongoing process. Within Chidester's presentation of the categories, formations and circulations of dynamic material religion, I discerned the beginnings of a novel method. This method could form part of the work needed to materialise the nonhuman and invisible

agents that matter in the practice of religion. In my understanding, Chidester's critical material approach could lay the foundation for a coherent and inclusive study of religion in the 21st century. That said, focusing on invisible agents invites criticism.

Graham Harvey being accused of 'animist theology' is an example of this form of dismissive categorisation. This is problematic on many counts, not the least that it underlies the construction of an implacable dualism at the heart of the discipline. Moving beyond the secular vs. theological mindset, scholarship might open up to the complex systems of material becoming that form the basis of global resonances which fit neither Protestant nor secular frameworks. As I have argued, theology and secularity form a tightly coupled modern dualism in the study of religion. With a non-theological object of religion in sight, the question can now turn to possibility of a non-secular object of religion.

I have discussed a domain of human practice that is neither world-religion nor secularism. It forms a third position, one which transgresses the modern dichotomy. This domain consists of indigenous and nonmodern practices, and is obscured by the abyssal divide, which began as a hegemonic colonial device. The abyssal divide makes absent a large portion of humanity's world-making practices. The need to attend to this divide is paramount. For this I have suggested a further step in Chidester's material approach, the analysis of material absence.

That which the secular makes absent forms the ground of the non-secular approach. The study of absence does not only attend to lack, but allows that which is absent to generatively present itself. In my material analysis of critical religious studies, my focus has been drawn to the absence of the nonhuman and more-than-human agents that come to matter in the practice of religion. I have argued that the hegemonic hold of secular onto-epistemology on the academy bars scholars from critically engaging these agents.

The methodology for moving beyond Protestant theology is already available, post-Cartesian material dynamics provide a non-theological framework for analysing invisible agents. What non-secular frameworks are available? In answer to this, I have suggested nonmodern relational dynamics. These dynamics track reciprocal material relations between humans and nonhumans along lines of kinship. By consulting the work of Francis Nyamnjoh, who presents general principles of African indigenous practice, I have described a cosmos that is in constant motion and comprised of ever incomplete material becomings. Within this framework, the principles of incompleteness, conviviality and domesticated agency sustain networks of

agents in relation. These principles present a non-secular framework that emerges from material relation, and compliments Chidester's non-theological framework that emerges from material dynamics. In this bringing these frameworks together, I have argued for a critically inclusive, post-abyssal analysis of religion in which the discipline of religious studies is neither avowedly theological nor secular.

That said, there are important limits in the products of bridgework I have presented. My location as a scholar within the northern canon ultimately limits the view I am able to get of nonmodern world-making practices. While I have reached for scholars on the abyssal side of the line, my capacity to engage with and integrate their work remains bounded by what little bridge I have managed to construct so far. In this case, the value of my work lies more in the questions it may raise than the answers it tries to provide. To move beyond these limits, the bridge building must continue, until such time as the abyssal divide is overcome.

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