

Atheism for lent? Discipleship, praxis, and expanding the canonical masters of suspicion

Ateísmo para a quaresma? Discipulado, práxis, e expansão do cânone dos mestres da suspeita

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Abstract

This article explores how the “Masters of Suspicion” can be used for understanding discipleship. From this, it queries into expanding this canon of masters to include decolonial thinkers. Resultantly, this article explores potential contributions to the life of faith from thinkers such as Achille Mbembe and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. To situate its argument, the article engages Merold Westphal, who articulates a form of Christian discipleship through a hermeneutics of suspicion which he calls ‘Atheism for Lent.’ This article first explores how Westphal provides religious persons with a structure to engage postmodern critique, which entails a brief exploration of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche’s potential contribution to discipleship. The article will then engage Westphal’s framework within an African context, extending his appropriation of suspicious critique to engage decolonial thought. This article concludes by proposing an expansion of the canonical Masters of Suspicion to include the likes of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and Achille Mbembe, amongst others. The upshot of this is threefold: first, it valorizes the notion that a suspicious critique of religion can aid discipleship; second, it provides more pathways for decolonization to enter into religious discourses; finally, it pushes Westphal’s concept of “Atheism for Lent” beyond a Western context and into one that embraces new forms of suspicion.

Keywords: Decolonization. Liberation theology. Merold Westphal. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Pastoral theology. Philosophy of religion.

Resumo

O artigo explora como os “Mestres da Suspeita” podem ser usados para compreender o discipulado e, a partir daí, procura expandir esse cânone de mestres para incluir pensadores decoloniais. Consequentemente, são abordados potenciais contribuições para a vida de fé de pensadores, como Achille Mbembe e Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Para situar o seu argumento, o artigo envolve Merold Westphal, que articula uma forma de discipulado cristão por meio de uma hermenêutica de suspeita, a qual ele chama de ‘Ateísmo para a Quaresma’. Primeiramente, analisa-se como Westphal fornece às pessoas religiosas uma estrutura para se envolverem na crítica pós-moderna, o que implica uma breve exploração da potencial contribuição de Freud, de Marx, e de Nietzsche para o discipulado. Depois, a estrutura de Westphal é engajada num contexto africano, alargando a sua apropriação da crítica da suspeita para envolver o pensamento decolonial. Na conclusão, é proposta uma expansão dos mestres canônicos da Suspeita para incluir pessoas como Ngugi Wa Thiong’o e Achille Mbembe, entre outros. O resultado disso é triplo: primeiro, valorizar a noção de que a crítica da suspeita sobre a religião pode ajudar ao discipulado; segundo, proporcionar mais percursos analíticos de decolonização a serem introduzidos nos discursos religiosos; finalmente, projetar o conceito de Westphal de “Ateísmo para a Quaresma” para além de um contexto ocidental e para um que abrace novas formas de suspeita.

Palavras-chave: Decolonização. Teologia da libertação. Merold Westphal. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Teologia pastoral. Filosofia da religião.

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Introduction

If there is anything that connects the varied strands of postmodernity it is the distrust in the foundations that create or support ideologies and the distrust in the institutions that employ these ideologies for self-legitimation. Religious ideologies and institutions are often the center of these critiques, and how could they not be? Religion – particularly the Abrahamic traditions which cast a global shadow – has often been used to support ideologies of war and inequality, arguing that those who hold certain beliefs are ‘justified’ in God’s eyes and therefore their actions are equally righteous. This critique of religion often splits theologians and philosophers of religion. Some view postmodernity as an intellectual sledgehammer aimed at destroying religion altogether (WESTPHAL, 2001). Others, however, see keen insight and critique within postmodern thought where, if one listens, they can hear a familiar echo of the prophets calling out for discipleship. Concerning the latter, suspicion against theology and religious praxis is nothing new and this current critique is not only familiar, but also necessary.

In what follows I will explore how the American philosopher Merold Westphal takes up this call for discipleship, becomes an advocate for postmodernity’s critique of religion and metaphysics in general, and also seeks to bring this critique from the academy to the church. I will do so by first detailing how Westphal provides Christians with a framework to engage postmodern critique. From there, I will briefly explore how he employs this framework in his book “Suspicion and Faith” where he argues that Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche – Ricoeur’s so-called Masters of Suspicion – can aid the Christian in discipleship through what Westphal calls “Atheism for Lent” (WESTPHAL, 1998). I will then conclude by briefly placing Westphal’s framework within an African context, extending his appropriation of suspicious critique to engage decolonial thought and thereby expanding the canon of the Masters of Suspicion to include the likes of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and Achille Mbembe, amongst others. This last component cannot be an exhaustive exploration due to the wide variations across decolonial and African philosophy. Rather, it is something of a “proof of concept” which reveals that the hermeneutics of suspicion, as it is currently employed in philosophy of religion and in theology, needs to expand its engagement with new authors. In short, it needs to expand its canonical authors and general reading of what suspicion is in this context and how it might be employed. Concerning this impetus, I find that Ngugi and Mbembe are strong entry points for Western audiences which is why I chose them for this argument.

Regarding Westphal, it is clear that he is not the only author that engages in a hermeneutics of suspicion in philosophy of religion or theological discourses. However, I have chosen his work for two main reasons. First, his approach to suspicion is unique in the sense that it is not a mere corrective within his philosophical method but, rather, an integral component to his overall philosophy. I will speak more about this below but, in summary, Westphal seeks to overcome onto-theology through a self-transcendence that opens the self to a greater transcendence in a dynamic relationship with a theistic God². This self-transcendence needs a suspicious critique against itself – both in its beliefs and its actions – in order to occur. In this way, a hermeneutics of suspicion does more than make his work transparent for review and critique, it is has an essential function for the life of faith (SANDS, 2018a).

Second, Westphal’s “Suspicion and Faith” was primarily written for a lay audience which, in addition to making his use of suspicion approachable, reveals a pastoral intent within his work (SANDS, 2018a). That is, through “Suspicion and Faith”, Westphal reveals that he is deeply interested in the moving of theory into praxis. I find, and will show below, that this relationship between theory and praxis is also an imperative in decolonial thought (SANDS, 2018b).

²For more, see “Overcoming Onto-Theology” (WESTPHAL, 2001). I have also covered this previously in “Radical eschatology: Westphal, Caputo, and Onto-Theology” (SANDS, 2014).

Merold Westphal's approach to atheism and discipleship

Merold Westphal is often situated alongside Richard Kearney and John Caputo since all three approach postmodern thought as a means to explore critiques against religion and metaphysics in order to address how one can maintain an understanding of God and an appreciation of religion. However, Kearney and Caputo seek to rethink God through a *theo-poetics* to remove the beingness, or *ontos*, of our understanding of God. They find that Heidegger's onto-theological critique of metaphysics reveals that the relationship between God and violent ideologies is one where God, or any highest being within a metaphysics, grounds or legitimizes these ideologies. Before unpacking Westphal's thinking, then, it is important to compare his work to Kearney's and Caputo's to highlight Westphal's contrasting approach and to emphasize what he is *not* arguing.

Kearney's atheistic wager and the possibility of God – a God of *possē* rather than *ontos* – reminds us of how endowing God with beingness can become a “recipe for war” since this endowment often comes from, or in the very least becomes, a representation of our own selves and desires (KEARNEY, 2010)³. For Kearney, this is an ideology critique of the idolatry of God within our metaphysics; whether this be a religious god or a secularized god, the being of this god sacralizes our ideologies⁴.

Caputo takes a similar approach, first through his concept of ‘religion without religion’ and then through his notion of the “weakness” of God. Here, with his emphasis on the messianic weakness of God – rather than a kingly God of power – Caputo likewise reminds us of the dangers of ideology and, while arguing for a movement away from endowing God with being, Caputo's thinking pushes further into poetics in order to perceive God as critically revealing – a messianic tearing away – of our own will-to-power (CAPUTO, 2006b)⁵. Here, God's messianic weakness arises through a deconstruction of our desire for self-autonomy; a religion that abnegates religion in pursuit of this revealing opens us to the possibilities of a more just, more liberating faith⁶.

Although Westphal agrees with Heidegger's critique, he explicitly diverges from his colleagues by arguing that the beingness of God seen within onto-theology is a thoroughly human problem which does not call for disavowing theism or God's beingness (WESTPHAL, 2004). Rather, Westphal thinks that Heidegger's critique of the ‘god’ within metaphysics calls for Christians to continually recognize that they are not God – not that a theistic God does not exist – and that it is the idolatrous deity built up by modernity that Nietzsche famously argues is dead. Seen through a Kierkegaardian lens, Westphal's sense of faith and its praxis thus becomes a task of a lifetime to overturn or overcome the idolatry within onto-theology. He does so through an epistemological and ontological finitism which must continually be practiced through ethics and liberation theology. Citing Kierkegaard alongside (or within) Levinas' phenomenological ethics as first philosophy, Westphal proclaims that “all theology should be liberation theology, a guide to the practice of overcoming oppression in all forms.” In being so, all theology should be “confessional”, “a guide to the practice of spiritual formation”, and, importantly, “theology will have to develop a self-critical hermeneutics of suspicion” (WESTPHAL, 1992, p. 242).

³ Kearney, recorded panel discussion with Merold Westphal in “Is There a God after God?” (KEARNEY; WESTPHAL, 2018).

⁴ He has spoken about this multiple times see “The God Who May Be” (KEARNEY, 2001), “Anatheism: Returning to God after God” (KEARNEY, 2011). To see the convergences between Kearney and Caputo, see: “Richard Kearney's enthusiasm” in “After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy” (CAPUTO, 2006a).

⁵ Note that this “weakness” is a messianic weakness in the sense that Walter Benjamin highlights.

⁶ Here, Caputo finds that he is in accord with Kearney, see “God, perhaps: the diacritical hermeneutics of God in the work of Richard Kearney” (CAPUTO, 2011).

Space and scope prevents us from going into how he brings Kierkegaard and Levinas into the dialogue, but the upshot is that Westphal presses Christians to become better disciples through a postmodern framework that continually reminds them of their finitism and desire for self-autonomy. Importantly, he finds that this critique is always already within Christianity, particularly within the prophets whom he sees as presaging the Masters of Suspicion and most postmodern critiques of religion and metaphysics. In fact, he claims that, when one steps back and recontextualizes the “themes in question” articulated by these suspicious thinkers, one finds that *their proper home* is within Christianity itself and its tradition” (WESTPHAL, 2001, p. 9, author’s emphasis). In other words, Westphal thinks that their critiques have been made continually throughout the biblical, Judeo-Christian tradition and he aims to reveal the connections between this tradition and those like Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche through dialogue and appropriation⁷. For example, writing for the magazine “Christian Century”, he argues:

What kind of knowing subject might survive the critique of modernity’s proud pretensions? Every postmodern answer to this question emphasizes the finitude of the human knower. We are not God. But then, coming from a different quarter, doesn’t the Christian theologian, whether the preacher in the pulpit or the professor in the seminary, want to say the same thing? [...] In spite of a deep disagreement about God, there is a deep agreement between Christians and postmodern thinkers that we are not God and should not claim divine status for our knowledge (WESTPHAL, 2003, p. 33).

This sentiment drives Westphal’s work. Speaking about his own religious faith and his philosophical vocation, Westphal states that:

If there is ultimately a theological rationale for my serious exploration of these powerful secular forms of finitism – variations, if you will, on a Kantian theme – it is clear that there is a willingness to be put into question. [...] Faith in the unchangeableness of God does not entail the unchangeableness of faith itself, for faith is not so much my holding onto God as it is my willingness to let God hold on to me. [...] I don’t have the world on a string (or God in a box), as I did when I first came to philosophy. But I am convinced that I understand both God and myself better because of these losses. What Jesus said about finding our life through losing it has many meanings, one of which, in my experience, pertains to the life of the believer engaging in philosophical reflection (Matt. 10:39, 16:25) (WESTPHAL, 1994, p. 221).

Importantly, Westphal is highlighting suspicion against religion and the faith which undergirds it, not skepticism of religion itself. Skepticism, in his context at least, challenges the “the soundness of arguments for the existence of God” whereas suspicion questions “how theistic belief functions both to mask and to fulfill forms of self-interest that cannot be acknowledged” (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 14).

To develop his self-critical discipleship, Westphal appropriates Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion, which Ricoeur initially conceived of as a means to reveal bias and maintain transparency concerning phenomenological description. Westphal takes this hermeneutics of suspicion and fashions it as a means for the believing soul to become self-critically aware of how they all too often, all too humanly, co-opt God for their own will-to-power (WESTPHAL, 2001)⁸. This hermeneutics thus becomes an access point. It is a means to practice an “Atheism for Lent,” or a reflection upon suspicious critique to move

⁷ He does this through his academic work, such as in “Overcoming Onto-Theology” and “Transcendence and Self-Transcendence”, but he has also maintained a dialogue with non-academic Christians (WESTPHAL, 2004).

⁸ This sentiment is repeated across both “Overcoming Onto-Theology” and “Suspicion and Faith” (WESTPHAL, 2001, 1998).

the believing soul “from penance to penitence to repentance” (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 4). For Westphal, this framework for discipleship is also prophetic:

I am calling on the philosophers, theologians, and above all the pastors and lay teachers of the Christian community (1) to be the prophetic voices that challenge the church and to take seriously the critique of religion generated by suspicion and (2) to lead the way in using it as an aid to personal and corporate self-examination. The emphasis of Christian spirituality on personal self-examination and the emphasis of Hebrew prophecy on corporate self-examination make it possible to speak of the religious uses of modern atheism when we speak of the atheism of suspicion (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 16).

Returning to his sense of faith, Westphal’s prophetic hermeneutics of suspicion thus allows the believing soul to recognize that it is not faith which allows one to hold onto God, but, rather, faith allows God to hold onto the believing soul. In effect, losing one’s faith in order to find it maintains the belief that if God is real, and religion is an access to God’s revelation, then it should welcome all forms of critique since nothing can destroy God or religion; critique can only destroy the idols fashioned for self-legitimizing ideologies.

However, some scholars may turn suspiciously against Westphal, thinking that he has all too easily blunted the critique of suspicious atheists by recontextualizing them within the extant, biblical Judeo-Christian tradition. Other scholars may note that these suspicious atheists likewise blunt the force of this tradition’s own form of suspicion and critique. In effect, these concerns against Westphal’s appropriation may be that the authors or texts in question are not taken seriously enough.

A particular example could be when Westphal jokingly states that Marx “plagiarizes” his critique from Amos! Westphal proclaims that “Marx’s critique of capitalism is, in essence, the biblical concern for the widows and the orphans, stripped of its theological foundation and applied to the conditions of modernity” (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 203). This, he finds, is why liberation theologians have often appropriated from Marx to bring a biblical critique of economic and political oppression to a contemporary world. This sort of hermeneutical maneuver to bring Marx closer to biblical critique, particularly concerning Amos’s prophetic critique, may make some postmodern scholars a bit squeamish concerning the true force and perspective of Marx and Marxism. It may also make theologians and religious authorities squeamish.

Consider the debate around liberation theology and its eventual suppression as it took hold in South America in the mid-20th century. Moreover, the liberation theology debate was not just a doctrinal issue but also a political one, further complicating the matter (MACKIN, 2012). Westphal’s aim within “Suspicion and Faith” does not cover this concern. Rather, his aim is to present a framework for believers to access these atheistic authors beyond the aforementioned apprehension against postmodernity. This also allows a space for dialogue by merely bringing the two together: the conversation between Marx and Amos opens a space for a philosophical and theological dialogue concerning ideology critique, and perhaps there is more to the relevance of these covalent critiques than meets the eye.

Secular theologians of original sin? Westphal’s use of the masters of suspicion in brief

I will only briefly cover Westphal’s review of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche given that Westphal uses their works extensively throughout his writings. In so doing, I will mainly show how he appropriates them

within a Lenten reflection. This will give us more time to discuss how this appropriation, and Westphal's overall framework, might work within an African context of transformation and decolonialization.

In summary, Westphal sees these Masters as "the great secular theologians of original sin" since they reveal "the deep divergence between human behavior and the moral ideals of Judeo-Christian Theism" (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 77). Through Freud, Westphal finds a secular theology of original sin that criticizes humanity's willing self-deception (WESTPHAL, 1998). Whether it is to find blame and to place guilt – think of an angry God who punishes – or a means to craft delusions of power – think of a God who blesses a chosen one – Freud reveals how we can project upon God our inner desires, guilt, and wishes (WESTPHAL, 1998). Through Marx, Westphal finds a secular theology of original sin that criticizes humanity's need for ideologies to legitimize their actions. Marx shows us how human resourcefulness uses all the intellectual tools at its disposal to craft a worldview that justifies its own behavior (WESTPHAL, 1998). Through Nietzsche, Westphal finds another secular theology of original sin oriented around willing self-deception. Either through scapegoating or by crafting a morality that places the believer on the true path, Nietzsche shows us how easily the desire to do good or be good can become a desire to proclaim oneself as good and others as evil (WESTPHAL, 1998). His critique reveals the need for critical self-awareness, harking back to Westphal's argument that theology and Christianity needs to be hermeneutically self-critical.

Westphal gathers from Freud's psychoanalysis how doctrine and religious belief can become "shaped by amoral desires, against the very evidence to which the believing soul appeals" (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 64). Here, one's interpretation of Scripture, as well as one's appeal to Scripture, may become a means for legitimizing their own self-interest. This is often seen through proof-texting passages to make a point, or when a community reads within the Scriptures how they are 'God's chosen people' and therefore their actions are righteous. Westphal argues, surprisingly, that the Scriptures are often the very place where one should find a critique against these deceptions: either through the stories of Israel and the prophets who rebuke Israel against these sorts of deceptions, or through Jesus' reprimand of the Scribes and Pharisees (WESTPHAL, 1998).

What he finds within these sorts of proof-texting and self-deceptions is a neutralization of the critiques within Scripture. He calls these "techniques of neutralization". One powerful technique is "Overt Espousal", where people explicitly declare "that the behaviors and institutions that produce needless suffering are the will of God. Human ingenuity is combined with human sinfulness, it becomes possible to manipulate the message of God's shalom so that it seems to sanctify a sinful drive for power and wealth" (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 174). Westphal cites the Afrikaner's legitimization of Apartheid in South Africa as an example. Citing James Michener's "The Covenant" and its depiction of the Battle of Blood River in 1838, he quotes thusly:

The real victor at Blood River was not the Voortrekker commando, but the spirit of the covenant that assured their triumph. [...] What the Voortrekkers failed to realize in their moment of victory was that they had offered the covenant to God, not [God] to them. Any group of people anywhere in the world was free to propose a covenant on whatever terms they pleased, but this did not obligate God to accept that covenant, and especially not if their unilateral terms contravened His basic teaching to the detriment of another race whom [God] loved equally (MICHENER, 1980, p. 548)

Michener continues by stating how the Voortrekkers took their victory as a sign that God had accepted their covenant and how this convinced "men like Tjaart van Doorn [...] that whatever they did was done in consonance with [God's] wishes" (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 176). What Westphal sees here, and articulates through Marx's ideology critique, is a "One-Way Covenant" where a neutralization of

Scripture and Christianity's concept of revelation (what he calls an Overt Espousal) allows a people to believe that their theology of holy war, as well as their theology of economy and society, is blessed by God. Westphal goes on to cite various examples of this within Christian history, but each one often comes back to the same premise: our violence and exploitation is justified because God wills it so. The result is a profanation and destruction of religion and of God. "The South African blacks", Westphal states, "see in the God of the Afrikaner covenant, not the Maker of Heaven and Earth, but a cruel figment of Afrikaner imagination" (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 181).

To be clear, Westphal is only giving the South African example to highlight something that has happened throughout Christian history – past and present – in hopes for better, future Christian praxis. This willing God is a willing self-deception for Westphal, and Nietzsche's critique reveals to us how thoroughly human, all-too-human, this self-deception is. Nietzsche's genealogy of human behavior is a precursor to postmodern hermeneutics – whether of suspicion, deconstruction, or what have you – in that it aims to find what lies underneath our morality and social constructions; what is "behind the world" as Nietzsche states (NIETZSCHE, 1967; WESTPHAL, 1998). Furthermore, Nietzsche's critique is not just against religion either; although we know of him as the one who states that "Christianity is Platonism for the masses" and that "God is dead", he is likewise critical of how "scientific objectivity is Platonism for the enlightened elites of modernity" (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 227)⁹. Nietzsche's critique of *ressentiment* and revenge via morality reveals the logic of power at play within ideologies and metaphysics: for if God is a human invention, then who created God? Humanity did! Although we do not have the space to cover it thoroughly, this is partially where Westphal sees the onto-theological critique as a thoroughly human problem and the proclamation that "God is dead and we killed him" is primarily a proclamation that the Enlightenment and modernity unmoored themselves from a sort of god and have sought elsewhere for their self-legitimization.

Morality is thus a sort of lie, Nietzsche argues, which we tell ourselves out of *ressentiment* and revenge. Here, the oppressed resent their masters' sense of legitimization, crafting their own where the oppressed are justified, glorified, perhaps even deified (WESTPHAL, 1998). Nietzsche sees that Christianity is bloated with ideological revenge and its morality follows suit; that its slave heritage – first through Jews and early Christianity – lives on in how it deals with proclaiming certain acts as evil, but what is really at issue is who holds power and sovereignty. There is a logic of power at play, and Nietzsche uncovers this logic through Christian history and theology (along with Western metaphysics). In this matter, Westphal often brings in Kierkegaard's critique against Christendom to show a parallel critique of self-deception. In 'Overcoming Onto-Theology', a work written for the academy, Westphal argues that Nietzsche makes for a great diagnostician, but that one must look elsewhere for the remedy, and for him Kierkegaard provides this remedy through his concept of faith and his emphasis on becoming an ethical self (WESTPHAL, 2001).

In effect, if one must lose their faith in order to receive it, Kierkegaard becomes a means to return back to, or to receive, faith after suspicious critique. For the sake of time and scope, we cannot cover exactly how Westphal brings the two in conversation and how Kierkegaard is always elevated above Nietzsche's critique, but suffice it to say that Westphal sees them as "proto-postmodernists" but promotes Kierkegaard's emphasis on the irrationality of faith – that faith's opposite is sin and not reason – and that the ethical task of faith breaks this logic of power (WESTPHAL, 2001).

⁹ See also Westphal "He is interested in unmasking the hypocrisy of the whole system of values they help to propagate, whether it be called slave morality, the ascetic ideal, altruism, the Golden Rule, Judea-Christian morality, or whatever. His writings thus constitute a kind of ongoing guerrilla warfare against the virtues of that morality. That warfare is sometimes overshadowed by the attention given to such dramatic doctrines as perspectivism, the death of God, the Overman, and the eternal recurrence" (WESTPHAL, 1998, p. 246).

What we have covered thus far is how Westphal's framework for engaging atheist suspicion for Lenten reflection, in order to move the believing soul from "penance to penitence to repentance", hermeneutically recontextualizes suspicious critique and sees within it timely and timeless truths. These truths echo biblical revelation, and although we could not specifically get into which prophets, proverbs, and stories Westphal uses to show these corresponding echoes, we can do so in future discussions. For now, we will move toward the question of appropriating Westphal's framework within an African context and thereby expanding the canonical Masters of Suspicion.

The african masters of suspicion

Before we move on, it is important to note that exploring religious critique within an African context is nothing new. Indeed, theologians and philosophers alike have been in dialogue with this critique for quite some time in pursuit of transformation, reconciliation, and restitution (SEREQUEBERHAN, 2015)¹⁰. From a missiological perspective, this has yielded a critical self-awareness regarding how one evangelizes and has also helped further develop a theology of religions. In short, it is not like this conversation appears on the scene because of Westphal.

My proposal here is that Westphal's framework might contribute to putting theory into praxis and to further enhancing critical dialogues through his appreciation that the believing soul must pass through a self-critical hermeneutics of suspicion in the process of better enacting faith. Furthermore, outside of the African context, I propose that Westphal's framework further enables Western theologians and everyday Christians to engage decolonial, suspicious critique. Although they may be a continent away, their actions – either through the governments they elect or their capitalist, consumerist economies – have global consequences and thus they need to expand their critical self-awareness.

I therefore will present two all-too-brief examples of how thinkers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Achille Mbembe might be included in this expansion of the canonical Masters of Suspicion. My aim with this paper was not to give them short shrift at the end, but, rather, my hope is that this paper will make the case for why we need to expand our canonical Masters of Suspicion. From there, we can then research further into how these expanded critiques at once reveal hidden assumptions and presumptions (particularly the elevation of Western ideals at the expense of other cultures) while also critique the nature of canon formation itself as a logical framework built on power (SEREQUEBERHAN, 2012)¹¹. Finally, from a theological perspective, this brief review of Thiong'o and Mbembe will also show how their work might function within a pastoral, Christian context such as Westphal's, where these new critiques help bring the believing soul from "penance, to penitence, to repentance" via an Atheism for Lent.

Judging religion through its politics: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Achille Mbembe

Published in 1981, Ngugi's 'Decolonizing the Mind' was a landmark text for African and decolonial thought since it presented the full force of colonialism: colonialization is not merely a conquest of resources, it is also a conquest of culture and mindset. Colonialism's "most important area of domination", Ngugi

¹⁰ See also "The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: horizon and discourse" (SEREQUEBERHAN, 2012). Also note that both Achille Mbembe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o take critical stances against Christian missionaries throughout their work (MBEMBE, 2001; WA THIONG'O, 1981).

¹¹ I have discussed this elsewhere in "Why read the west? Messianicity and canonicity within a postcolonial, south african context" (SANDS, 2018c).

argues, “was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools for self-definition in relationship to others” (WA THIONG’O, 1981, p. 16).

This quest for cultural domination led to what Ngugi calls colonialism’s “cultural bomb,” or the annihilation of “a people’s belief in their names, their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (WA THIONG’O, 1981). This makes the colonized feel not only that their culture is worthless but also inferior to the colonizer’s culture which, in turn, presents the colonizer as a savior of sort. Importantly, the effects of this bomb lingers long after colonizer leaves. For one, this annihilation effectively severs a cultural heritage from the present; one can never fully return back to the culture they once embraced. For another, the colonizer’s culture (as well as his religion) still holds a dominance over and against this cultural heritage, thus perpetuating this perceived inferiority.

Ngugi highlights how this cultural bomb operates, and still continues to have effect within language. He does so by telling how, in his native Kenya, this control came through language, where he and his fellow students were severely punished if they were caught speaking Gikuyu instead of English. Furthering this control, students were indoctrinated to tell on each other, effectively reinforcing this mental control (WA THIONG’O, 1981).

Ngugi’s expertise as an author and literary professor highlights the relationship between linguistic control and mental domination. He was also one of the first persons to explicitly critique works like Alan Patton’s “Cry the Beloved Country”, as a narrative “in which a subservient non-violent African Christian Uncle Tom is the hero” and that the work “took its themes and moral preoccupation from the Bible: but such a novel was also a product of a deliberate policy of the government and missionary-controlled presses” (WA THIONG’O, 1981, p. 69). Here and throughout his “Decolonizing the Mind”, Ngugi highlights how these sorts of narratives reinforce a colonial mentality; a mentality that is intertwined with Christian mission-work and its cooperation with colonial regimes. Ngugi is revealing, to a degree, the Overt Espousal and a neutralization of the Gospel message and this neutralization appears to proclaim peaceful harmony. However, through mission-controlled/approved novels like “Cry the Beloved Country” and through the emphasis on learning the colonizer’s language and losing one’s native heritage in the process, this distorted Christianity co-ops the colonizer’s desire for power and autonomy over and above others – others whom, as Michener stated, God loves equally.

The critique that Christianity’s mission work operated hand-in-glove with the colonial quest for empire is a reoccurring assessment throughout decolonial work. As Ngugi highlights, both require a degradation of the other’s – of the non-Christian’s – beliefs and its subsequent culture. V. Y. Mudimbe highlights this in his seminal work, “The Invention of Africa”, where he summarizes thusly:

First of all, it is a language of derision, insofar as it fundamentally ridicules the pagan’s Gods. And one must not forget that since its birth Christianity has appropriated for itself both the only way to true communication with the divine and the only correct image of God and God’s magnificence. Second, it is a language of refutation or systematic reduction: all pagan religions constitute the black side of a white transcendental Christianity, and this metaphoric opposition of colors means the opposition of evil and good, Satan and God. The third feature illuminates the missionary’s pragmatic objectives: his action is supported by a language of demonstration, which reflects God’s truth. In order to sustain his derision for and refutation of non-Christian beliefs and practices, the missionary emphasizes the Christian faith in terms of its historical coherence and transforming

virtues. Religious and biblical categories enter into the logic of his civilization, thus making sacred a cultural model and giving it a divine seal. Consequently, there is a fourth characteristic: the rule of Christian orthodoxy which relates Faith to knowledge of the only Truth. This is the cornerstone of the belief in the supremacy of the European experience, the support of a fantastic set of principles. It accounts for the following major principles: first, that the Christian characteristic resides in the quality of Faith and not in moral grandeur; second, that it is Faith which promotes and gives sense to ethics and not the contrary. The last trait of missionary discourse relates to these two axioms and their theological significance: it is a language that conforms to these vigorous axioms. Missionary speech and praxis prove that no human enterprise can succeed as long as the true God is not (MUDIMBE, 1988, p. 64).

What both Ngugi and Mudimbe cast suspicion upon is Christianity's destructive nature; that for it to take hold within the believer, he or she needs to repent and abandon their past ways (WA THIONG'O, 1981). The believer must effectively and fully embrace Christianity and its culture (*i.e.*, its ideologies), which entails fully disavowing their past beliefs and culture. Some Christians may object to this perspective and could cite various theological, doctrinal, and biblical sources that preach the contrary. However, just like with Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, Ngugi (along with Mudimbe) begin their critiques by observing Christian praxis – particularly through mission work – and then genealogically explore the ideological and theological roots that legitimate these practices. Alongside Westphal's use of suspicion, one can see Ngugi questioning the relationship between faith and politics as well as how one can judge a belief system by its politics (WESTPHAL, 1995)¹².

I find that this suspicion between religious belief and politics correlates to the relation between theory and praxis. Just like with Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, decolonization's suspicion against missionaries in particular and Christianity as a whole stems not from a skeptical esteem of God or the Bible. Rather, it rises from judging Christianity from its history and from the ideologies espoused by this history. In this way, Ngugi provides Christians with a historical reminder of not just their past deeds, but of the theologies that legitimized those deeds. This, I find, would make for a good Lenten reflection à la Westphal.

Mbembe continues this movement from "penance to penitence to repentance" by citing that it is not just an imperative to judge how Christianity can be used to delegitimize other cultures, but also how Christianity can be used to uphold an ideological power construct; a logic of power that is, ironically, antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.

Achille Mbembe's "On the Postcolony", amongst his other works, follows this suspicious critique against Christianity's role within colonization and highlights a postcolonial Africa that, through its nationalism and so-called Africanization, is still caught up in the subjectivity – that is the otherness – within the West's logic of power (MBEMBE, 2001). He does this through his particular reading of Franz Fanon, especially within "The Wretched of The Earth"¹³.

In the chapter, "God's Phallus," Mbembe highlights how, in the wake of obliterating indigenous cultures, the monotheistic traditions of Christianity and later Islam, brought in a logic of power that assumes omnipotence, a sense of the ultimate or completeness, and a closure to other cultures. This, he argues, has left a political devastation as political operatives have scrambled for sovereignty after so-called

¹² I have written at length about what I call Westphal's "litmus test" for religious faith and praxis. See "Reasoning From Faith", Ch. 3 "Westphal and Hegel, Judging Religion through Politics" (SANDS, 2018a).

¹³ I had wanted to include Fanon in this discussion but thought it best to see how Fanon's critique of the logic of power has been developed within contemporary decolonial thought. Fanon is foundational to decolonization and therefore addressing him in such a brief fashion may do his work and influence a disservice. For more on his potential importance to theology, see "Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity" Chapter 4 "Frantz Fanon's decolonial love: a new humanism in historical struggle" (DREXLER-DREIS, 2019).

colonial liberation. The task of decolonization thus begins, aligned with Ngugi, with breaking apart this mental decolonization. He states thusly:

One can say that monotheism is a special way of formulating knowledge about final ends. The question of how truth and final ends are to be determined is, of course, the very prototype of a political question. By firmly rejecting any notion of the relativity of truth, monotheism postulates the existence of a universe with a single meaning. [...] To the extent to which the matter is one of inscribing a specific ideonormative configuration into the human condition, there is no longer a religious problem alone. In actuality, monotheism implies organization of some arrangement that is presented as legitimate and that resolves conflicts between a plurality of divinities such that one is endowed with a monopoly on truth. How this arrangement is produced is clearly a political travail (MBEMBE, 2001, p. 215).

For our present concern, this harkens back to the onto-theological critique of metaphysics – and to Freud’s critique against religion – in that the highest ground of one’s metaphysics, or God within Christianity, is often used to proclaim what is truth and good while *ipso facto* determining what is false and evil. For Mbembe, even after the Christian mission work and its cooperation with colonialism ends, the phallic structure of power and sovereignty remains. What Christians may glean from this critique is how they construe power – recall Westphal’s finitism and his emphasis on the fact that ‘we are not God’ – and here Mbembe shows us how this is not just a religious concern, nor a political one, but rather a theo-political issue where monotheism and single-party nationalization are one in the same from a metaphysical perspective. Their enclosures create an otherness, and here that legacy is seen through so-called “Africanization” or African nationalism (MBEMBE, 2017). One can see within this critique a covalence with Nietzsche’s critique of morality as *ressentiment* and a tool used for revenge.

Mbembe reveals that this theo-political logic dominates the discussion and, even when a people wishes to reject the colonizer’s politics, religion, culture, and so forth, they often maintain this logic when doing so (MBEMBE, 2001; MBEMBE, 2017). Latent within this desire and its logic is a notion of the messianic that perpetuates the idea that change/revolution requires violence. One can think of the notion of the messianic, or of salvation in general, with (as Mudimbe highlighted above) its need to expunge, discard, or otherwise expel something in order to cleanse or purify (MBEMBE, 2019)¹⁴.

Importantly, Mbembe notes that this is not merely a colonial logic, but an aspect of Western metaphysics writ large. Furthermore, again aligned with Nietzsche (as well as with a vast array of scholarship outside of these traditions), this Western metaphysics is founded upon, and intertwined with, Christianity. This matters for our present purpose because – returning to Westphal’s Lenten reflection – many Christians seek to distance themselves from Christianity’s past by speaking of themselves as if they have transcended, are “outside”, or nevertheless are excused from the implications and judgments of this past. Here, one can think of Christians who proclaim that they had nothing to do with the partnership between colonialism and Christianity and therefore are excused from criticisms of this partnership. Mbembe argues to the contrary that the logic and beliefs which founded this partnership are still maintained in Western society today and, as we have shown with the relationship between politics and religious belief, by implication they are still maintained within Christianity.

In a sense, in line with Westphal’s notion of secular theologians of original sin, Mbembe is describing the pervasiveness of this logic of power and its corruption; that no one is excused from its grasp and

¹⁴ See Ch. 4, “Viscerality,” in “Necropolitics”. Mbembe speaks of “negative messianism”, which “is a kind of messianism that has either forfeited the idea of redemption as such or as been reduced to a crude belief in the expiatory power of bloodshed.” Mbembe then goes on to highlight that, “in its minor version, it is about survival and the willingness to sacrifice and be sacrificed. Its aim is to turn a forgiving God into an ethic and angry god. In its major version, it is about collective suicide before the Apocalypse” (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 104).

that we must accept this – that is, we must acknowledge our complicity (an examination of conscience as well as a confession, if you will) – before we proceed with decolonization. For our present purpose of employing suspicious critique in the process of discipleship and reflection, this means critically examining the theologies, doctrines, and foundations that have either been crafted or misapplied for violent, ideological purposes.

Conclusion

This article's thesis was that the religious critique found within the so-called Masters of Suspicion (as well as within postmodern thought in general) can be appropriated and employed within a Christian discourse to aid in discipleship. It argued this thesis through exploring Merold Westphal's concept of 'atheism for Lent' where he took the so-called Masters of Suspicion – Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche – seriously as a guide to move the believer from "penance, to penitence, to repentance". Following this, I argued that this canon of masters needs to be expanded to include decolonial thinkers, and I brought Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Achille Mbembe into dialogue with Westphal and his Masters to show how this was possible and necessary. The upshot of this engagement was to open Christianity – theologically and as it is practiced – to critically re-examine its foundations and history in the hope that this will improve its fidelity to the teachings of Jesus Christ through the Gospels. Theological in nature and approach, my general conceit was that the relationship between discipleship, praxis, and suspicious critique needs to be strengthened.

Concerning Westphal's framework for 'Atheism for Lent,' I find that it allows a space for two dialogues. First, a dialogue within Christianity where believing souls can reflect upon their own transgressions and how they legitimize them. Second, a dialogue between Christians and suspicious critique (Western or Decolonial) where each can present their beliefs and arguments not for refuting the other's claims, but to listen and upbuild their communities. These dialogues must be in tandem, at least for the Christian, and Christians cannot merely dialogue with themselves. For how can one move from penance, to penitence, to repentance without engaging the other, the one who was outcast by the Christian's actions? How can one recognize Christ in the face of the other without facing the other? This is indeed a hard task, one that is already being done within South Africa and within African communities as a whole. Westphal allows us to further develop this dialogue while also building a bridge to the larger, global Christian community to participate in Lenten reflection.

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