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# Subjects of God? Rethinking Religious Agency, Biography, and Masculinity from the Global South

Marian Burchardt & Johannes Becker\*

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**Abstract:** »Gottes Untertanen: Religiöse Handlungsmacht, Biographie und Männlichkeit im Globalen Süden«. Religious specialists inhabit ambivalent institutional positions. On the one hand, as professionals working for organizations, their scope of autonomy is constrained and subject to organizational rules, religious dogmas, and religiously sanctioned restrictions on their own lives in the form of celibacy, choice of residence, etc. On the other hand, because of their charisma and their epistemic authority with regard to, for example, the interpretation of everyday events, personal crises, religious scriptures, and moral judgments, they may also have considerable autonomy and power. In this article, we compare the lives of Greek Catholic monks in the Middle East and Pentecostals pastors in South Africa. We focus on the question of how the subjective understandings and objective realities of personal autonomy relate to one another and change in the course of religious specialists' careers. Scrutinizing religious agency in a gendered environment allows us to analyze how dominant constructions of connections to God, religious charisma, and ecclesiastical careers reproduce the masculine structure of church institutions. While Eastern Catholic monks are often portrayed as extremely constrained by institutional rules, Pentecostal pastors appear as largely autonomous, organizing the religious affairs of their congregations in a highly independent fashion. Our analysis demonstrates that such images often mirror idealized portrayals that are produced by dominant religious discourses. As our analysis also shows, however, these discourses obfuscate both the agency of monks and the institutional constraints of pastors.

**Keywords:** Biography, agency, subjectivity, masculinity, Middle East, South Africa, religion.

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## 1. Introduction

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Why do men embark on biographical journeys as religious specialists – as clergy, pastors, or monks? How do these religious specialists experience particular situations that shape their institutional careers, and how do they navigate the religious fields in which their biographical becoming is embedded? Why are some religious specialists successful in attracting followers, satisfying their followers' religious needs, and accumulating religious capital, while others fail? How do understandings of masculinity and male domination shape the religious fields through which their biographies unfold? In other words, how and why do men remain central agents in reproducing religion as a largely patriarchal institution?

In this article, we address these questions by comparing the religious careers and biographical trajectories of two types of religious specialist located in two different Christian traditions: Eastern Catholic monks in the Middle East and Pentecostal pastors in South Africa. Our analysis begins with an empirical puzzle: standard accounts of Christian monks and Pentecostal pastors place these figures at opposite ends of a spectrum of empirical institutions (Marshall 2009; Winthrop 1985).<sup>1</sup> While as inhabitants of a greedy (Coser 1974) or even total institution (Goffman 1958) Eastern Catholic monks appear to be subjected to a rigid regimentation of their daily routines and biographical trajectories, Pentecostal pastors are often portrayed as religious entrepreneurs who base their preaching on divine inspiration in only minimally institutionalized fields and are thus unfettered by institutional and doctrinal constraints.

However, as our ethnographic data reveal, while adequately pinpointing the structural features of both fields, such accounts fail to capture the dynamic, multifaceted, and divergent nature of monks' and pastors' institutional careers and biographies. As we shall show, Pentecostal pastors are often subjected to severe yet hitherto unnoticed institutional and material constraints, while monks' biographical pathways show greater variation and possibilities to act than institutional scripts seem to suggest. Our main argument is that there is a need to rethink the concept of religious agency to account for these findings and that certain limitations linked to conventional understandings of religious agency have limited scholars' attention to these features. In addition, we argue that biographical research helps us to understand how exactly religious agency plays out over time, an aspect that has been largely ignored thus far.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on individual qualitative research carried out by Marian Burchardt in Cape Town and Johannes Becker in Jerusalem. In this article, for practical reasons we use the generic pronoun "we" throughout.

Significantly, over the last three decades the concept of religious agency has been at the center of much scholarly debate at the intersection of gender studies, the sociology of religion, and institutional analysis, having propelled both controversy and theoretical innovation. However, as we argue, the debate on religious agency has suffered from several shortcomings: It has remained tied to a relatively narrow set of empirical questions (the role of women in conservative religions); it has largely ignored all questions relating to masculinity and the specific forms of male religious agency; it has been limited to one specific dimension of religious agency, namely that related to relationships between lay believers and divine powers (Keane 1997); and it has privileged the structural features of interactions between humans and the divine over temporal questions regarding the ways in which religious agency develops over time, or in other words the processual features that shape how religious agency is played out in believers' biographies.

Finally, the debate on religious agency has rested on sometimes exaggerated and stylized dichotomies between on the one hand the modern secular West, where religious agency was presumably perceived as deficient *per se*, and on the other hand fundamentalist groups as the West's inner periphery of sorts, as well as an undifferentiated geographical "non-West." Here, religious agency is seen as pervasive and mostly equated with the voices of the subaltern. In the sociology of religion, few concepts are arguably as contested as that of religious agency because it is widely perceived as deeply grounded in different cultures of modernity, divergent civilizations, and religious traditions, each with their own epistemologies and ontologies. We argue that the concept of religious agency is therefore an ideal test case for conceptual innovation in Global Sociology and the question of the universalism, scope, and particularity of terminologies and concepts.

To account for the shortcomings highlighted above, in this article we develop a multi-dimensional concept of religious agency that is informed by existing theories and grounded in a South-South comparison while avoiding essentialist and overly differentialist accounts of regional culture. In addition, we demonstrate its usefulness for understanding the biographies of male religious specialists and the ways in which conceptions of masculinity and male domination shape them. We begin by situating our account within the anthropological and sociological discussion of religious agency.

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## 2. What is Religious Agency?

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The question of the place of agency in sociological theory has always been central in the discipline, but it was debated especially in the 1980s in the wake of mounting criticism of macro-structuralist accounts of modern society and capitalism. Theoretical approaches such as Marxism and structuralism à la

Lévi-Strauss were charged with ignoring human creativity and producing deterministic understandings of structural influences on social action (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1977). However, the question of agency appears to be especially vexed in relation to religion as a field that is characterized by the relationships of humans to higher beings who were considered to be particularly powerful and to be supernatural forces. In general, these beings (gods, deities, or spirits) are construed as inhabiting an entirely different sphere – transcendence – as therefore being removed from direct influence by humans, and hence as necessitating the work of religious specialists who possess particular non-routine abilities, skills, and charismatic qualifications to mediate between the mundane sphere of humans and the exalted sphere of the gods. Agency therefore appears to be fundamentally concentrated on the side of gods and religious specialists, and the greater the amount of power ordinary believers ascribe to them, the less agency ordinary believers appear to possess. The very notion of religious agency rests on the paradox that, for ordinary believers, agency only exists inasmuch as they locate it outside themselves by ascribing it to higher beings or religious specialists. In this context, Talal Asad (1996, 271) critically remarked that the very notion of agency strongly reverberated with subjectivity as a hallmark of modernity and that, as a doctrine, it had become central to our recognition of people’s humanity, while at the same time being at odds with religious discourses and ways of being.

In an influential article, Saba Mahmood (2001) linked Asad’s critical inquiries into religious agency with the question of emancipation as a global and arguably universal tenet of feminism. In her research on the Islamic movement in Egypt, Mahmood explored the practices of pious women whose main goal was to achieve particular ethical self-realizations and forms of pious subjecthood. Central to these efforts were mutual religious teachings which generally took place outside the purview of male religious authorities, as well as submission to religious norms through learned ways of feeling, acting, and being.

Based on this research, Mahmood claimed that, overall, existing accounts of women in religious contexts tended to highlight the fact that, while being subjected to male domination, women produced – both unconsciously and strategically – moments of disruption or resistance to their oppression. As Mahmood argued, despite this, such expressions of resistance appeared to reinscribe instruments of their oppression. In this, she followed Arlene E. MacLeod (1992), who conceptualized such tendencies as “accommodating protest,” i.e., a form of protest which tends to reproduce gender inequalities despite women’s efforts to better living conditions for themselves and their families. As Mahmood (2001, 206) argued, “agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual

or collective).” She concluded that, in the liberal-secular worlds of feminism, or social theory for that matter, female religious agency could only ever be fathomed as resistance to religious norms.

Ever since, scholars of religion have sought to come to terms with the religious agency of women in conservative contexts juxtaposing agency and resistance on the one hand, acquiescence and complicity on the other (Avishai 2008, 410). Intent on unfolding the seeming paradox that women were supportive of religious systems that perpetuated their own subordination (Chong 2006, 697), they argued that women’s compliance with authoritative religious norms was strategic, subversive, and incomplete. Therefore, it was presumably less compliant than it appeared at first sight but full of hidden forms of resistance and empowerment (see also Scott 1990). Subsequently, scholars began to criticize these approaches for their inability to frame women’s interests outside universalist ideas about female emancipation and for failing to account for the inherently religious element in religious agency (Bracke 2008, 62). Mahmood (2001) suggested that agency may also rest precisely in learned, skillful forms of submission to religious norms and in self-authoring projects grounded in docile conduct. Avishai (2008, 413), by contrast, argued that such an approach was at odds with the notion that “docility also functions as a technology of power,” and instead proposed to sideline the focus on religious norms altogether by privileging religiosity as a practical accomplishment, i.e., by focusing on forms of “doing religion” from the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

While agreeing with Avishai’s considerations, we suggest that the debate still suffers from several shortcomings. First, because of the one-sided focus on female agency, male religious agency and masculinity appeared as generally unproblematic and became a blind spot. While there is now a considerable sociological literature on religion and masculinity (Burchardt 2018a, 2018b), it remains divorced from theoretical discussions on agency. Second, because of the recent emphasis on piety in concepts of religious agency, the multiple *social and institutional* dimensions of religious agency have remained undertheorized. And thirdly, as our brief discussion has demonstrated, the question of how religious agency plays out over time through biographical trajectories and how it is narrated in biographical accounts has been largely ignored.

To account for these shortcomings, we suggest a multi-dimensional concept of religious agency that pays attention to the relationships of religious specialists to diverse structural environments in their temporal unfolding. Here we follow Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 970), who defined agency as “*the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in*

*interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*" (italics in the original).

These structural environments are (1) the divine powers addressed by religious specialists, and religious actors more broadly; (2) the institutional fields in which they operate, including other religious specialists, superiors, and followers; and (3) the field of ordinary everyday interactions in which religious specialists engage in all sorts of non-religious practices and interactions and where the boundaries between the religious and the secular are constantly blurred. As we seek to demonstrate through our analysis, there is much sociological value in moving beyond a notion of "pure religious agency" to include the mundane aspects of the lives of religious specialists.

By adopting this suggestion, we follow Avishai's symbolic interactionist approach and highlight its resonances with the more recent emphasis and research into "lived religion" (Ammerman 2016; McGuire 2008). We approach lived religion by comparing the forms and constraints of agency among religious specialists as they can be reconstructed in their biographies. Yet, unlike most other scholars in this field, we do not focus on the religious practices of lay people. Instead of examining "ordinary people as religious subjects" (Knibbe and Kupari 2020, 157), we explore *religious specialists as ordinary subjects*. In doing so, we contribute to questioning the divide between official and popular religion that also pervades part of the research on lived religion (Ammerman 2016, 88). In this sense, we explore how religious specialists – as the publicly visible faces of "official religions" – negotiate the institutional demands and expectations of their daily conduct and other biographical desires and needs. Lived religion, we argue, is always boundary work. For instance, religious specialists such as monks and pastors are always confronted with the question of whether what they do is in line with institutional expectations and religious values, the extent to which creative action can be legitimized, and which kinds of profane practices need to be accommodated within religious biographies with a view to ensuring the survival of religious organizations.

Examining, as we do, the practices of religious specialists, it is impossible to sideline institutions as in much research on lived religion. Instead, we highlight how institutions shape religious biographies in a two-fold and often ambivalent manner. *First*, religious institutions and fields present religious specialists with sets of possibilities and restrictions, determining some areas in which the scope of autonomy is considerably constrained and others where they have greater flexibility. However, these areas and possibilities vary in the different stages in their careers and lives. This is true of inherited organizational rules, religious dogmas, and religiously sanctioned restrictions of their own conduct of life (e.g., celibacy, choice of residence, etc.), among others. The influence of institutions also varies in different religious traditions, partly due to the ways they are embedded in macro-

historical contexts as well as civilizational and regional specifics (Arjomand 2013; Eisenstadt 2000). *Second*, as Leming (2007, 74) has argued, the concept of religious agency allows “the processes of structuration (Giddens 1984) as it is occurring in religious institutions” to be examined. Simultaneously it provides the means to conceptualize the ways in which individuals, “by their choices and actions, give shape and form to the structures of society, including religious institutions, even as they participate in their ongoing, gradual transformation” (ibid.). Again, we emphasize that religious specialists shape institutions not only through their religious practices, but also through complex negotiations of divergent capacities, purposes, and freedoms.

Central to our comparison is the difference between monks as members of an institutionalized collective and charismatic pastors as religious entrepreneurs who establish, lead, and manage their own churches or congregations centered on their charisma and biography. For monks, they enter through a sworn oath into an existing collective, while charismatic pastors obtain their office primarily through a charismatic calling rather than an organizational, certified career.

Eastern Catholic monks are subjected to strict institutional hierarchies, relationships of dependence, and rules that guide the everyday conduct of life. Below we explore the extent to which “greedy institutions” (Coser 1974) such as monasteries “seek exclusive and undivided loyalty” (ibid., 3), albeit loyalty mostly on a voluntary basis. Being a monk is also connected to institutional demands to downplay subjectivity. Yet, as Gavin Flood (2004, 2) elaborated, the monastic goal of a passive, “ascetic self” is only possible through an embodied, gendered self with a name and a will, which necessarily creates tensions. Michael Angrosino (2004, 28) addresses this tension as the monks’ “pride about the process of having had their egos ‘tamed,’” although this “process has not been fully completed in most cases.”

Therefore, in relation to the concept of multi-dimensional religious agency proposed above, we have to take into account not only the monks’ beliefs and institutional demands, but also their own desire to reach an ascetic selfhood, as well as their relationships within and outside the church. This ambiguity becomes clear if one deals “with the monks as real people” (ibid.), as we do below. We discuss the extent to which belonging to the monastic realm results in largely disabling individual autonomy or actually in leaving, or even actively producing, spaces for religious agency, and perhaps a reliance on them. This containment of contingency in the life of monks also extends into the material realm, given that monks’ basic material needs for food and housing are one of the monasteries’ responsibilities. Importantly, the position and rules for monks differ: while some monks live a secluded life devoted to prayer and work, others actively represent the church to the outside world. Brother Michel, introduced below, belonged to the latter category.



For South African Pentecostal pastors, the challenges attached to religious life are almost entirely reversed: there is no centralized control of their religious beliefs and ritual practices, and rarely any higher authorities who might interfere with them. As opposed to the monks, their religious lives are interwoven with those of their followers to an extreme extent and embedded in the latter's social and economic lives in general. The lack of financial and material security means that Pentecostal pastors are forced to operate as religious entrepreneurs who depend on the successful marketing of their religious skills. This implies that Pentecostal pastors appear to be institutionally predisposed to have maximum degrees of religious agency expressed, for instance, through their abilities to shape their religious projects and biographies according to their own divine inspirations, visions, desires, and convictions. Yet this agency is not only refracted through the theological discourses in which it actually appears as an extension of divine, i.e., God's, agency; it is also constrained by poverty and the multiple material needs – those of themselves, their families, and their congregants – that they have to take care of.

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### 3. Methodology

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Our case studies rest on extended biographical interviews, as well as ethnographic observations with religious specialists, as these methods are especially apposite to elucidate the temporal dynamics of religious agency (Wohlrab-Sahr and Frank 2018). The aim was to engage with pastors and monks in ways which were not limited to their institutional role or their position in ecclesiastical and monastic hierarchies as the heads of a congregation. Analyzing religious agency as a multi-dimensional concept required both a broad biographical interview question and the analytical tools to disentangle institutional from other modes of presentation (Rosenthal 2004). Our interviewees were invited to develop autonomous self-presentations, followed by narrative questions on aspects which they had already mentioned in this first part; only at the end of the interviews did we turn to additional questions (Schütze 1987).

Crucially, the way these interviews worked in practice differed between monks and Evangelical pastors. For the latter, telling their biographies was a defining element of their religious practice, as it gave them an aura of subjectivity and religious agency that spilled over into the research interview. The interview form appeared normal and unproblematic to them. In contrast, for the monks, the interview's focus was often a source of bewilderment and uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> This question challenged their usual scope of self-presentation

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews conducted with monks in Jerusalem in between 2010 and 2014 were part of a larger study on biographical processes of emplacement in Jerusalem's Old City. Cf. Becker 2017.

within the limitations of the order and the church. Implicitly, the opening question was an invitation to widen the scope of the interview, and it triggered the tacit question always co-present in the interviews as to what extent they should talk about their own biographies. Some of the monks tried to avoid personal narratives altogether. They remained in their role as representatives of their churches and orders, employing institutionally desired modes of presentation, including collectivized statements about their priesthood, spiritual practices, and pastoral care. Others meandered between generalized statements on the one hand and personal memories on the other hand, which pushed themselves to the fore while partly contradicting the hegemonic narratives of their church and order. Most research involving interviews with monks used more limited questions focusing on their institutional biographies since their entry into the orders and monasteries (e.g., Angrosino 2004; Bruder 1998), likely missing this quintessential dilemma that questions about their complete life stories posed to the monks.

Analytically, we used biographical reconstructions which include an analytical separation of the analysis of the religious specialists' life courses in a chronological way and the sequence in which certain topics were mentioned in the interview (Rosenthal 2004). This separation illuminated a complex relationship of porosity and self-control triggered by either the monastic/church discourse or practiced modes of personal restraint. Carefully reconstructing the interview text enabled us to reconstruct which stages of their lives were presented in the frame of an institutionally formed presentation and regarding the periods or experiences in which they diverted from such predisposed or well-practiced scripts.

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#### 4. Pentecostal Pastors in South Africa: Biographical Pathways and Tensions

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When we interviewed Pastor Sumzi in his home in the township of Khayelitsha on the outskirts of Cape Town in 2015, he was 37 years old. While it seemed to us that, overall, he had found his place in life, he was still struggling in multiple ways. His home was a very modest one-story house with three rooms located in Town Two, a section of Khayelitsha that, in terms of income and material infrastructural conditions, falls somewhere between the informal settlements as the most disadvantaged areas and the more affluent middle-class sections of the township.

We opened the interview by asking Sumzi to tell us the story of his life, especially the story of how he became a pastor and how he started his own church. As with other biographical accounts of Pentecostal pastors, Sumzi's narrative appeared to be interspersed with highly scripted depictions of

religious experiences, interweaving descriptions of biographical events with dramatic stories of his conversion to charismatic Christianity, of being saved and becoming a “born again” believer, and of the demonic attacks he suffered in the process. In the cultural world of African Pentecostalism, accounts of oneself, or “testimonies,” as they are widely called, play a fundamental role in testifying to the role of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in one’s life. Performed in front of audiences during Sunday services, cell-group meetings, public crusades to “win souls for Christ,” or family-based devotions, such testimonies validate religious experiences, and interpretations of mundane everyday experiences as spiritually significant, in collective ways. Moreover, as a genre that gives dramatic and narrative shape to such interpretations, they inevitably find their way into biographical stories. As we argue, in Pentecostalism the very genre of biographical narration tends to highlight and exaggerate the religious agency of believers, especially pastors.

Sumzi was born in 1978 in the township of Alexandra in Johannesburg, where he also grew up. He was raised in a family that belonged to the Zionist Christian Church of South Africa, and thus to a church that foregrounds African prophecy and is widely known to combine Christian beliefs and an orientation towards the Old Testament not only with ancestor worship and ancestral rituals, but also with an openness towards traditional healing rituals, which black South Africans consider distinctly “African.” When he was still a child, his mother told him that he was very sick and took him to Baragwanath hospital, which under apartheid was Johannesburg’s largest hospital for non-whites, where he had to spend several weeks. In his perspective, his frail health and general physical weakness as indexed by this stay in hospital was a symptom of his lack of spiritual protection and of the kind of powers that Pentecostalism would later provide. He enrolled in primary school in Johannesburg, but after a few years moved with his family to the small city of Queenstown in the Eastern Cape province, where they would spend the following seven years. During his time in primary school in Queenstown he was constantly relegated to lower levels because of his poor linguistic performance: as a native speaker of isiZulu and Tswana with little knowledge of isiXhosa, he felt considerably underprivileged and had to struggle more than his fellow learners. However, after the family moved to Khayelitsha in Cape Town in 1995, he finally managed to finish high school with grade 12.

Importantly, biographical experiences such as growing up in a religious environment that was considered deficient, or in hindsight even demonic, or problems with educational institutions play central roles in Pentecostal narratives as biographical moments that trigger an urgent need for change (see also Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). Other pastors told us how they grew up in dysfunctional families, where their mothers sent them away to be raised by their grandparents because they worked as prostitutes, and how they suffered from addiction to drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. One pastor we interviewed

recounted his entire life as being driven by the effort to come to terms with his mother having been a prostitute. He nonetheless found the love of Jesus and thus the power for forgiveness and was able to reproduce a word-by-word quote of the pastor who guided him into salvation: “You must forgive your mother and your father. Whatever you think about them – it was not them, it was Satan.”

Sumzi’s adolescent life during high school in Cape Town was also characterized by consumption of drugs and alcohol: “It was tough for me,” he told us; “You know, I was really bad, I was smoking dagga,<sup>3</sup> drinking alcohol, and then because of that I started to steal inside the house, in my mother’s house, and then I went outside the house and did bad things with some other guys.” In a typical adolescent downward spiral, he began enjoying drinking and drug-taking with friends, while the increasing desire to impress his friends by buying and providing them with the drugs lured him into stealing from his mother whenever necessary. In addition, he began to date girls from the neighborhood, which increased his need for money, as within the townships’ gendered economies of intimate relationships, men had an obligation to buy gifts for their girlfriends and to provide for them in one way or another (Hunter 2010).

Sumzi’s relations with his family thus slowly deteriorated while he still resided in his mother’s house, and they became even worse when, because of economic problems, his mother had to rent out his room and he began to live in the house of a paternal aunt. After discovering that he had repeatedly stolen things from their house too, his relatives increasingly turned against him. Yet, as he also claimed, family members repeatedly did harmful things to him, especially when living in his paternal aunt’s house with his cousins: “My aunt loved me very much, but the problem was with my cousin sisters.” As an aunt’s cousin he was supposed to play a secondary role in the house and help in the household. When he failed to do so, his cousins’ antipathy against him and their perception that he was living as a parasite on resources that rightfully belonged to them intensified even further, and they grew increasingly resentful of him. These resentments and feelings of greed reached the point at which, in the eyes of Sumzi, his cousins sought to bewitch him to make him leave their house by poisoning his food, an experience which he recounted as follows: “Yes, they were poisoning the food, they tried to kill me. But I saw the poison down there in the food, that saved me. By that time I already started to pray, but they were also disturbing my prayers. But by the grace of God, I managed to overcome.”

In this passage, he gestured towards a transition, which had already begun in 1998 when the first signs of his spiritual awakening began to show. While still being immersed in Khayelitsha’s regular youth life, drug consumption

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<sup>3</sup> “Dagga” is a colloquial Afrikaans term for marihuana.

and dating (Burchardt 2011), he started to sing in a gospel choir, and during the interview, he actually recalled a particular song that, in his own words, touched his heart very strongly. And then eventually, as he put it, “in 1999, I met the Lord. They preached, and the word just hit me.” This happened in the context of an evangelical street crusade, an essential element of Pentecostal religious life in South African townships, replete with loudspeakers, ecstatic preaching, singing, and encounters with the Holy Spirit. Sumzi was so overwhelmed by the experience of change he felt occurring within him that he participated in the same crusade for four days and four nights, including whole-night prayers, which he passed almost without sleep. This experience culminated in a moment he described as follows: “I raised my hand and I said, I surrender myself to Jesus! Jesus came into my life. In front of all people and the pastor. And then my life changed bit by bit.”

We suggest that this experience of conversion and its description reveal both the Pentecostal conception of religious agency and its actual unfolding in particularly salient ways. On the one hand, it is Sumzi who let his heart be touched by the Holy Spirit, who spent four days and four nights in an evangelical street crusade, and who eventually raised his hand and surrendered himself to Jesus. On the other hand, it was the Holy Spirit who, through the song, touched his heart and Jesus who came into his life. This paradoxical entwining of autonomy and heteronomy in which one’s agency enacts one’s submission is at the heart of Pentecostal conversion as an objective process, and the experience of “being saved” as its subjective manifestation. Significantly, experiences of “being saved” always require some sort of collective validation, as in the case of Sumzi, where it happened “in front of all people and the pastor,” who acted as witnesses of the presence of the Holy Spirit (Burchardt 2020).

Several points are particularly noteworthy here. First, while the Pentecostal concept of religious agency entails the idea of conversion as both initiating and ratifying a process of radical personal change and a deep temporal rupture, we interpret conversion sociologically as actually a process in time that begins before the experience of “being saved” and changes one’s life “bit by bit,” as Sumzi said, not overnight. In hindsight, Sumzi suggested that “in my mind I thought I wanted to change. I actually needed to change but I didn’t know where change could come from!” He thus drew on the Pentecostal idiom of radical personal change to interpret his frustrating situation and attach religious meaning to it. But the story of his personal change is not one of rupture but of a process in which religious agency is cultivated over time. As such, it entails successes and failures. Sumzi also told us how he and some of his friends who also became born-again believers as him sometimes slid back by occasionally taking drugs and alcohol and how “Jesus Christ caught us. And then we repented for our sins and kept on struggling for change.”

Second, one of the critical experiences that Sumzi recounted as necessitating this radical personal change through conversion are specifically gendered and, in fact, reinscribe particular forms of masculinity into his sense of a transformed or reformed self: more than just a new person, he became a new man. The important point here is not that the entire set of practices, such as drug-taking, alcohol consumption, dating, and transactional sex, that he now considered problematic are the prerogative of men, but that in dominant discourses and collective perceptions these practices index a particular form of masculinity. In being read as such, they turn Pentecostal conversion into a gendered transition. In other words, religious agency and gendered agency become specifically entwined and reinforce one another.

This gendered practice and ideology of radical personal change was also documented in the ways in which Sumzi construed his religious upbringing after his conversion. As he perceived it, being raised in a family that belonged to South Africa's Zionist Church, he was living in a world where real change was impossible. As he suggested: "In the Zionist Church, you have to serve the ancestors and God, so you have to serve two masters. They [Zionists] do rituals, they wear the robes and clothes, but they don't feel the Holy Spirit with their hearts. And the ancestors always pull you back." This exercise of religious agency in disrupting his familial lineage of Zionist belonging contrasts powerfully with the trajectory of the monk Michel, whose biography we analyze below and whose family paved his way into priesthood and the monastery. Whereas Sumzi prided himself on leaving a false religion behind, Michel never considered that option.

After his conversion, Sumzi stopped doing the kinds of occasional piece-work jobs which had earned him a living after finishing school. Through the connections he made in the evangelical crusade, he met pastor Simon, who was also preaching out in the open in Town Two and who was running a church called "Life Center Ministries." Sumzi began serving pastor Simon, supporting him in his outreach activities, including the organization of the Sunday services, as well as other pastoral duties. As is common in the Pentecostal milieu in Cape Town, as pastor Simon's serving clerk or assistant he was allowed to live with him in his house in Khayelitsha. While to a certain degree this blocked his ability to marry and have a family, it also meant that his basic material needs were taken care of. He regularly ate in the pastor's house, and Simon also covered his expenses for transport, the main expense of Pentecostal pastors, as their services require high levels of mobility both within and beyond Khayelitsha and Cape Town. Sumzi continued to serve pastor Simon for nine years as an assistant pastor. In addition, in 2007 he began to work as a social worker in an orphanage that belonged to the church, taking care of the boys.

During this period, he underwent a process which in the Pentecostal idiom is widely called "maturing in the faith." Next to receiving a personal call from

the Holy Spirit, this is considered a fundamental prerequisite for becoming the pastor of one's own ministry, in other words, for starting one's own church. And whereas he did receive continuous approval and encouragement from pastor Simon during these years regarding his skills and abilities as a religious leader, in 2008 there were serious quarrels between the two as Sumzi grew increasingly unhappy with pastor Simon's style of leadership. Sumzi felt he was ready to assume greater responsibilities but was held back in doing so. As a result, he decided to leave Simon and start his own church. To this end, Sumzi required a letter in which Simon stated that he officially released him. Asked to write the letter, Simon had no objections and complied. We find echoes but also contrasts here with Michel's trouble with his superiors (see below): both felt constrained in their personal and religious trajectories. But the entirely different structures of the Catholic and Pentecostal religious fields implied that Michel had to find his way by simultaneously complying with institutional rules, remaining part of the field, and reaching beyond it, while Sumzi was, by and large, free to leave his preceptor, although leaving came at a price.

Importantly, it was also during this same period that, in his dreams, Sumzi received the calling from the Holy Spirit to become a pastor and start his own ministry, as this is what God wanted him to do. Yet in his retelling of these events – dreams of being called, but also being unhappy about Simon's lack of trust in his abilities to rise to office, demanding he be released from his church duties (the chronology is inconsistent here, and it is unclear what came first). We suggest that these inconsistencies reflect the structural tensions that are inherent in the process of separation. On the one hand, "maturing in the faith" and leaving one's church behind are recognized in Pentecostal circles as necessary steps on the path to becoming an independent pastor. On the other hand, doing so inevitably means rejecting the authority of one's lead pastor and in practice often entails that those who break away take some of the congregation with them, thus reducing the size of the church and with it the pastor's income through tithes, and potentially destabilizing the church itself. Beginning one's own church is thus not only one of the major forms of exercising religious agency, but one fraught with tensions and sometimes open conflicts.

In a pattern typical of the first stage of being an independent pastor, Sumzi did not have a permanent place of worship and faced enormous challenges in recruiting enough followers to form a stable congregation. This reflects the enormous competition in the charismatic field, where an increasing number of pastors compete over religious prestige, resources, and followers in a religious market with very low entry-barriers, little regulation and low levels of concentration. Sumzi's first congregants were young children, especially street children, who come lowest in the pastoral hierarchies of followers because they do not pay any tithes. Simultaneously, this reflected Pentecostal

imaginings of youth violence and gangsterism as the terrain where the work of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit become particularly visible, saving the most lost souls. At the time of the interview, Sumzi had finally reached the financial means to rent a community hall for his church gatherings, but he was still struggling, as he had no money as yet to buy any musical instruments. In a religious context where the electric amplification of keyboard-driven gospel music is widely considered to enhance the presence of the Holy Spirit (van Dijk 2020), this makes evangelism especially difficult. As Sumzi said, “We sing with our mouths only, going to preach door to door. Sometimes I preach in the street, taking my bible, holding my bible and preaching to the people in the street.” It becomes clear that seeking to recruit followers in such door-to-door campaigns sometimes appeared to be the only way to build a sustainable congregation. At the time of the interview, his congregation had 12 permanent members.

Asked about his sources of income, he told us that, even after three years of running the church he still did not receive tithes, but how he got to know an affluent white woman who introduced him to people in the catering business. While orders remain scarce and unstable, he receives regular donations from the woman. Drawing on a typical Pentecostal idiom, he suggested, “I trust that God will provide for us. I see how he provides me with 100 Rand or 200 Rand sometimes.” Significantly, though, he became very energetic in describing his economic vision to us, which was to raise young people in the faith who will then go and study, get good jobs, become prosperous, and return to give generous tithes as adults: “For now, I am growing them in the word. They will return as ambassadors of Christ.” For the time being, doing side jobs always appeared problematic because they were time-consuming, leaving too little time for engaged pastoral activities. He did not refuse occasional job offers but often ended up frustrated because of the ways in which side-jobs meant he could not attend to the need of his congregants in moments of spiritual trouble, offering prayers and blessings, which is precisely what residents expect from pastors. These are indeed the activities that make pastors widely known among township populations and that, at least partly, account for their popularity.

Having described the ways in which religious agency and masculinity are played out in the biographies of Pentecostal pastors, we now turn to analyzing the case of Eastern Catholic monks.



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## 5. Eastern Catholic Monks: Carving Out Pockets of Agency on the Institutional Margins

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Brother Michel<sup>4</sup> told us about an awakening during a church service when he was visiting the 11th grade of the minor seminary of his Eastern Catholic church in Lebanon:

It was for me ecstasy. I have not felt more like in heaven, a few seconds I was like in heaven, it was really we have spirituality to Jesus, one is young and one really has all possibilities [...], and afterwards I have decided to write my journal.

What at first reads like a “typical” narration of awakening is not in fact used by Brother Michel to explain further turns and decisions in his biography. Although he establishes his relationship to God with these words, the experience does not culminate in a call to action or a mission, unlike in the case of the charismatic pastor Sumzi. Indeed, the biographical interview with Brother Michel is determined less by his beliefs, ecclesiology, or spirituality, and more crucially by his relationship with his superiors, his career, and his position in the church hierarchy. This is related to the fact that Michel often tried to defend himself against decisions his superiors imposed on him. He struggled with the way his biographical path had been laid down for him. The lack of “religious agency” within the strict hierarchy of the order becomes clear in the following quotation, in the last sequence of the interview, in which Brother Michel frames his superiors as being God’s voice. It is their subordination under other, higher-ranking men, not their direct contact with God, which enables the monk to receive God’s messages:

Everything I had planned was not what God has planned for me, therefore we say: if we really listen to the will of the Superior, what we have always learnt – that is, God’s voice, sometimes it is also the voice of God. He has said “you stay” and I stayed, and now I meet Johannes, [otherwise...] we had never met (4) so finish, I cannot talk anymore.

The statement at the end of the quote – the joy at the opportunity to speak with the co-author – and the longer break are in a way typical of the interviews we conducted with Michel in Jerusalem’s Old City in 2014, totaling five hours over four meetings. They point to his being in an institution in which individual experiences are given little room to unfold. It became clear again and again that he was struggling with the tacit question of how much time he could devote to present his life and his “individual” self in the interview, throughout which he tried to argue that he had achieved many successes for his order because of his humility and flexibility. But throughout the interview, this thematic field became increasingly fragile. More and more

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<sup>4</sup> Names and details have been changed to protect informants’ identities.

strongly, negative experiences with the order appeared, which he tried to bring “under control” again. Now and then during the interview he remarked that he “talked too much” and he mumbled to himself, “enough now,” “that will do,” “yes that’s enough,” or similar phrases. This was also evident in his attempts to change the subject if he recognized that they were leading him into private topics. With this, on the one hand he tried to avoid his own person becoming too much the focus of the interview. On the other, he asked us at the end if we could send him an audio copy of the interview, as he had never talked so much about his life. Quite practically, his problems of locating the “I” can already be seen at the beginning of the interview:

OK, what shall I know I come from. I am, ah, my name is Michel. I am a priest, Father in an order, a religious order, Father Michel, my family name is Zaccour [spells the name]. I was born 1957. I am Lebanese by birth.

Here Michel attempts to define himself first geographically (“I come from”), interrupting himself with his vocation (“I am”), and finally beginning with his first name, which was given to him by his family, but which he still bears (unlike other monks) and which can therefore bridge the gap between his biographical background and his status as a monk. Michel then introduces his two institutional affiliations and merges them with his first name. However, he returns to the level of his family of origin and introduces his year of birth, his nationality, and his family name, which he even spells out. Thus, he finally positions himself with his biographical sense of belonging outside the institutional level of his church and order. Already from this small section, one can see how difficult it can be for monks to answer the question: who are you?

The following brief reconstruction of Michel’s biography focuses on a particular period of his life: between him taking his vows, aged 19, in 1976, and the end of his first placement as a pastor in Jerusalem in 1989. Michel Zaccour was born into a Christian family in the south of Lebanon in 1957. He says he had a quiet childhood, integrated into his pious family and Christian village community. His family was not rich, as they had lost much of their land and livestock in the course of time. Michel was the fourth child, following two older brothers and one sister; two sisters were born later. Already his older brother was attending the nearby minor seminary, part of the same monastery where Michel’s great-great uncle had been a monk and to which his father donated part of the harvest. Michel entered the minor seminary himself at the age of 11.

To this day, he does not know why. One reason was economic: for the minor seminary, whose graduates the order expected to become priests, only a nominal tuition fee had to be paid, which was much lower than that of the affiliated convent school. Many families used it as a cheap opportunity for educational mobility, although their children did not go on to become priests later. Another reason was that Michel was not considered fit for the life of a

peasant, being a “weak boy.” Michel’s older brother continued after the minor seminary and became a monk and parish priest. Although most priests in the Eastern Catholic churches are celibate, parish priests are sometimes married. If a priest wants to marry, he can only do so if he has not yet taken his vows as a monk and only before his ordination as a priest. However, those higher in the hierarchy (e.g., bishops) are chosen exclusively from the ranks of the celibate monastic clergy.

In 1975, when he was 18 years old, Michel entered the one-year novitiate in his order, and a year later he took vows of chastity and obedience to the order. He began to study history and theology in Beirut. Of the 39 students in his school class, only three began their novitiate. It is unclear whether Michel’s family always wanted him to become a priest or if they had only wanted to take advantage of a cheap education for him. In the political situation in Lebanon at that time – the full-fledged civil war had just begun in 1975 – the monastery was in any case a comparatively secure environment, and financing for his studies was guaranteed. Probably this was important for Michel because, already at school, his good grades gave him self-confidence in his intellectual abilities, which he did not possess in other areas of his life.

However, too pronounced a desire for education was prone to collide with the will of the order’s superiors. Just one year after taking his vows, Michel found himself in a fundamental conflict over education, his sexuality, and his duty of obedience to the order. The problems arose in deciding the course of his further studies. Michel wanted to do a double degree in history and theology, one reason being that he wanted to continue his studies with a woman he had met at university, the other his urge to enter an academic career. However, the rector of the ecclesiastical college allowed him only a three-year undergraduate course in history and foundational courses in theology. After that, he was to become a priest. When Michel refused, the rector wanted to dismiss him from the seminary, and Michel agreed. He still remembers the conversation vividly:

I said no, I want to study, but he said: no, you do as I want, and I had already taken my vows and had to be obedient and everything. I said no, I do not want, then I said I will study history like this girl and [...] I also wanted anyhow to study history because I knew history is important for the study of theology, especially the old history of biblical times, of course, out of scientific reason I wanted to continue studying. He [...] said no, then you don’t stay in the seminary, you are expelled, left, dismissed. I knew this is my vocation, but I wanted to study.

It is not surprising to see a 20-year-old man being placed in such a conflict because of his worldly desires in his choice of specialization and his sexuality. At the same time, the very possibility to study was likely reliant on the financial support of the church, which made him even more dependent on them than only by his vows. For Michel, it became apparent that he could not make independent decisions within the order. With their veto, the superiors

blocked what they might have seen as temptations not only in relation to the woman, but also regarding his selfish desire to study the way he wanted, with Michel hinting that he either saw himself as a married priest or an academic at that time.

Two weeks afterwards, the church and order offered a compromise: he would be allowed to complete his history studies, but only introductory courses in theology in addition. Michel agreed and fully immersed himself in university life. Parallel to his studies, he began to take English courses so that, as he said, he could read the current scientific literature. He started to spend some time in English-speaking countries. Michel talked about the rest of his university years almost exclusively in terms of the energy he put into his studies and his university successes. He identified strongly with the church, but through scholarly pursuits rather than as a simple, humble monk. He assumed that he would be able to continue his scholarly career and that he would be honored for his academic achievements by rising in the hierarchy of either the church or the order.

After the conclusion of his studies in 1981 and his ordination as priest, the Superior General informed him that he would be called to Jerusalem as a parish priest. This was an extreme disappointment and humiliation for Michel, a great shock. He was suddenly removed from the university environment. They may have chosen it for him as a way of disciplining a potentially inconvenient person. This disappointment came through even until today and became evident during the interview, in which he often presented his main narrative topic of being a talented priest who cares for his congregation. But when he attempted to connect this topic with his placement in Jerusalem, he was immediately presented with his conflicting experiences of disappointment and defeat which overcame his rehearsed interview presentation:

My experience on a pastoral level, it is important, if you are a priest and a pastor, and this was my experience from the beginning, that one is near to the people [...] When my foot was for the first time in the holy country, and then I was priest, and of course I had no experience, I was a student at university and had no previous experience. I was good, of course, and I even wanted to continue studying to specialize, do a PhD. I was among the first at the university, one cannot speak about oneself, but that one has two, two specializations, morning, afternoon, eight hours, and always working, all things to the end, completed and finished with success. I then really had the desire to continue studying some specialization, but I cannot say unfortunately but that was God's way [...] that I come here because I spoke English.

His superiors had given him hopes that his placement in Jerusalem would only be for a short time. In retrospect, it fills him with bitterness that they lied to him and that in the end the promised two years became ten. Again and again he comes back to this, and even from the perspective of the present, he still wonders about other possibilities that might have been open to him. Two years into his time in Jerusalem, in 1983, he wrote a letter to the Superior

General in Lebanon asking for his transfer and for his return to university, but he refused. Michel bowed, emphasizing in the interview that he had been obedient – and that, in so far as he did not want to jeopardize his career or future in the order, he had no other choice.

But Michel's pattern of interpretation began to change after relating the negative response to his letter in 1983. This had to do with his becoming aware that his dream of an academic career had ended and with his acceptance that his strength was seen in his pastoral work. He began to reinterpret his placement in Jerusalem as a resource for the formation of an extensive social transnational network which enabled him to leave the environment of church and order on a regular basis. Michel gradually established contact with numerous groups of British pilgrims to whom he gave talks. He traveled regularly to Britain and fostered many exchange trips by youth groups. These activities, considered compatible with his mission in Jerusalem, were very useful in expanding his social network.

This network also enabled him to help his family in Lebanon, who had to flee their village to Beirut at some point between 1983 and 1985 in the course of the raging civil war. His stay in Jerusalem thus provided Michel with the basis for practical action. He launched a massive fund-raising campaign that enabled him to buy apartment(s) for his family in Beirut:

I thank God: probably he had already planned for me to come here [...] it has really been the right place, and I have written so many letters to all friends and every friend in England, everywhere has answered really positively to me, always has sent a cheque in it. [...] If I did not come here, or if I did not have so many friends (2), then really, but God knows exactly. I never wanted back then to come here, I wanted to continue studying.

Michel thus reinterpreted his time in Jerusalem. While his disappointment was still present, he defined this period as one that made it possible for him to build a transnational social network with which he was partly able to leave the church environment. Maintaining his international contacts almost developed into a second career. It helped Michel to carve out a niche of agency, enabled a temporary self-shaping of his biography, and was a source of social and financial capital in the framework of an otherwise extremely limiting institution. In Britain he was treated as someone "special," being warmly received everywhere as a representative of oriental Christianity. Thus, he received the encouragement that had been denied him by his order.

Nevertheless, the disappointment of the arbitrariness of his order, which did not take into account his life's desires and did not make possible the promises of the religious life for Michel, never faded. Contributing to this perception was certainly the fact that he never rose in the church hierarchy as he had hoped, in exchange for his sacrifices. Rather, he was assigned to various places, never able to gain a footing or to advance permanently: in 1989 he became a parish priest in Jaffa, in 1991 in Jordan, before becoming a special

commissioner of the mother church for the renovation of church buildings after the Lebanon civil war between 1995 and 1999. In 1999, he was sent to Syria as a priest, then returned to serve as special commissioner from 2003 to 2011. After 2011, he was again sent to Jerusalem, where he took over the vacancy as the superior and was hopeful that he would finally be promoted. However, two years later another superior was appointed, to whom he became the secretary and administrator of the house. Finally, a few years ago, he was again sent to Jordan as a parish priest.

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## 6. Conclusions

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By way of conclusion, we wish to outline four central lessons for theories of religious agency that our analysis suggests. *First*, unlike what much of the existing literature suggests, we argue that there is a need to look at how religious agency unfolds as a process of biographical becoming, and thus over time. In other words, religious agency is not only played out in instances of actualizing relationships with God, for instance, through ritual. Instead, it drives the ways in which people pursue biographical projects, pathways, and visions. Upon his conversion to charismatic Christianity, Sumzi followed the calling he received from the Holy Spirit and pursued his vision of becoming a pastor and forming his own ministry despite the many drawbacks he experienced on the way. Similarly, he developed and remained in his trajectory as a Catholic priest despite many experiences of dissatisfaction and competing secular visions for his life. Against this backdrop, it would be wrong to reduce the discussion of religious agency to single, presumably decisive biographical moments such as conversion and ordination. Significantly, though, the ways in which religious agency works powerfully to shape religious careers depend on the different institutional arrangements within which they unfold. The informality or even absence of institutional control in Pentecostalism contrasts with the deep-running levels of control in Catholic monasticism. In both religious worlds, there are elaborate notions of what a religious biography looks like.

*Second*, these established understandings of religious biographies as careers involve particular notions of success, or successful careers. And while these provide major ethical and practical signposts and scripts for religious specialists, official notions of success run up against subjective experiences and people's practical realities of everyday life. Although to some extent Sumzi's religious biography seems to have been successful because he became an independent pastor, his inability to create any semblance of a working congregation and his permanent material dependence on occasional donations and piece-work jobs speak to his many failures. Michel's career, by contrast, was characterized by failures produced by his imagined trajectory

as an influential intellectual and spiritual leader of his church, which led to multiple disagreements between himself and institutional superiors and engendered outcomes that left both him and his superiors dissatisfied. And yet, he was able to create niches of fulfilment, recognition, and joy which lay on the very margins or even outside his institutionally assigned biographical spaces altogether, but which are carefully crafted so as not to aggravate his superiors or to risk a negative reaction from within his church and order. Whereas Michel's spaces of autonomy are located at the margins of his institutional career, those of Sumzi are placed at its center. Importantly, although Sumzi was free to cultivate his religious agency by opening his church after being released by his former head pastor, he was not particularly successful at it. Although Pentecostal leadership is often portrayed as a wellspring of religious agency and Catholic like its negation, we argue that religious agency is refracted by the different materials and institutional constraints that religious specialists face in both religious worlds. Its discussion cannot be divorced from the ways in which religious agency is both enabled and constrained by forces that are located *beyond* it, that is, beyond the religious field itself. The understanding of a particular religious biography as successful is always something that requires collective validation by both peer religious specialists and also lay audiences. Material success plays into such collective judgments.

*Third*, religious agency is fundamentally gendered, and it is only by recognizing gendered constructions of religious charisma, expertise, and careers that we can begin to understand, and sociologically explain why, especially in its officially endorsed variants, religious leadership, and the institutions they govern remains masculine. In the case of Michel and the Eastern Catholic priesthood, the agency of religious specialists is formally limited to men, and the reproduction of the church institution is even further limited to non-married men. In Pentecostalism, religious office, and the agency it embodies, is not formally gender-specific, but in empirical reality the overwhelming majority of pastors are men. Importantly, in each case, as a form of subjecthood and social status, religious masculinity operates across the different dimensions of religious agency. In Michel's case this involves celibacy – remaining unmarried, without a family, and sexually inactive – as a particular model of sexuality, the substitution of male household-headship by organizational headship, including his institutionally sponsored livelihood, and a specific, religiously sanctioned male honor afforded, or even “transubstantiated,” by the sanctity of the office. As a quintessential instance of gendered embodiment, Michel's male honor *is* the honor of the masculine church.

However, for Michel the office of the priesthood is at odds with his own personal ambitions, as it requires his subordination to it. As a religious specialist, he sees a clear limitation to his religious agency despite his position as parish priest. He transfers this limitation on to his superiors. The male clergy

above him are thus not only hierarchically superior, but also resemble a model of masculinity as those who carry the responsibility of the church on their shoulders and have “complete” religious agency. This is a male model Michel aspires to, but never reaches. For Sumzi and Pentecostal pastors more generally, religious agency is masculine because of the ways in which religious headship clusters around a whole set of masculine attributes and the ability to articulate “big-men-ship” (McCauley 2013), as well as managing patronage relationships with images of the spiritual protector and of manly prowess. Significantly, the masculinities of religious specialists are therefore perhaps minoritarian but not marginal. They work both by practices of outward *distinction* from other models of masculinity, and by *assembling*, or combining, elements of these into a single model that constantly nurtures religious agency as masculine, and the institutions it embodies as patriarchal.

*Fourth* and finally, we emphasize the consequences of the shift towards a multi-dimensional concept of religious agency for the comparative global anthropology and sociology of religion, and its implications for Global Sociology more generally. Thus far, debates on religious agency have been driven by highly stylized, binary constructions and their geographical mapping. According to Talal Asad (1996), under the hegemony of liberal secularism in the modern secular West as its presumed historical and sociological home, religious agency was necessarily deficient, or even an oxymoron. Whereas epistemic regimes of secularism thus delegitimized and disempowered religious agency, movements such as those of the pious Muslim women in Egypt studied by Saba Mahmood were virtually reduced to religious agency. Pious Muslim women, in the Middle East as elsewhere, and religiously illiterate secular Western liberals thus became the prototypical carriers of diametrically opposed ideas of human subjecthood. By contrast, we suggest that the multi-dimensional concept of religious agency helps us to move beyond such binary constructions that inevitably echo outdated, highly stylized binaries of Global North/Global South. In fact, conceptualizing religious agency as operating across several dimensions (including income generation) and driving gendered religious careers allows us to provincialize the simplistic contrast between liberal-secular subjecthood and pious religious agency. All forms of religious agency take shape and evolve as developing projects of biographical becoming but are also enmeshed with the practical problems of everyday life that are both religious and non-religious. As such, researching multi-dimensional religious agency does not release us from the need to contextualize our research. Quite the contrary, as it is often not clearly separable from everyday life, it requires a thorough social reconstruction of concrete social phenomena in specific geographical surroundings (Burawoy 2000), such as post-apartheid South Africa or the conflictual social histories of the Middle East.



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All articles published in HSR Special Issue 48 (2023) 4:

## Doing Global Sociology: Qualitative Methods and Biographical Becoming after the Postcolonial Critique

### Introduction

Johannes Becker & Marian Burchardt

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- An Introduction.

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### Contributions

G erard Amougou

Subjectivization Analysed by the Biography of the Subject-Entrepreneur in a Precarious Environment.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.38](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.38)

Mart n Hern n Di Marco

“Stop it with Mommy and Daddy!” Analyzing How Accounts of People in Prison Change with Their  
Trajectory in Argentinean Penal Institutions.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.39](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.39)

Daniel Bultmann

A Global and Diachronic Approach to the Study of Social Fields.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.40](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.40)

Swetlana Torno

Life-Course Management and Social Security in Later Life: Women’s Biographical Practices Spanning  
Generations and Historical Contexts in Tajikistan.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.41](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.41)

Marian Burchardt & Johannes Becker

Subjects of God? Rethinking Religious Agency, Biography, and Masculinity from the Global South.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.42](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.42)

Hannah Schilling

Navigating Uncertainty: Young Workers and Precarity in Berlin and Abidjan.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.43](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.43)

Arne Worm

Migrantized Biographies. Reconstructing Life-Stories and Life-Histories as a Reflexive Approach in  
Migration Research.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.44](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.44)

Joschka Philipps

Whose Uncertainties? Dealing with Multiple Meanings in a Transnational Biography.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.45](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.45)

Michael P. K. Okyerefo

The Autobiographical Self as an Object for Sociological Enquiry.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.46](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.46)

Eva Bahl & Yvonne Berger

Processes of South-South Migration in Their Historical Context: Biographical Case Studies from Brazil and China.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.47](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.47)

Nkululeko Nkomo & Sibusiso Nkomo

Melancholy as Witness and Active Black Citizenry in the Writing of A.S. Vil-Nkomo.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.48](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.48)

Gaku Oshima

Societal Envisioning of Biographical AIDS Activism among Gay People Living with HIV in Japan.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.49](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.49)

Fabio Santos

Mind the Archival Gap: Critical Fabulation as Decolonial Method.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.50](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.50)