Why I Am No Longer a (Traditional) Church Historian: Towards a New Church History Dynamic

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Abstract

History over centuries has been seen as the recording of past events. From Eusebius to Denis, the role of history has been to record past events for the archive by using time as the primary mode of analysis. Time, according to philosophers such as Bergson and Deleuze, is a continuous and impenetrable concept. However, philosophers like Foucault disagree. Many African ontologies reflect nature, discussions on ancestors, and land as actualities that form history. With these dynamics in mind, a decolonial and African dynamic of church history and the history of Christianity is attempted in this article. Using Foucault's concepts of discontinuity and embodiment as well as African ontologies, this article explores and discusses new dynamics in historical methodology. Firstly, the article provides an overview of modernity and postmodernity and their effects on the discipline of history as well as Southern African historical methodology and historiography and its developments. Secondly, the article analyses Foucault's concepts of discontinuity and embodiment, and African ontologies and their alternative modes of analysis for history. Finally, it proposes new opportunities for decolonial and Africanised storytelling within church history and/or the history of Christianity.

Keywords: Africa; history; methodology; church history

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Introduction

History over centuries has been seen as the recording of past events. From Eusebius to Denis, the role of history has been to record past events for the archive by using time as the primary mode of analysis. Time, according to philosophers such as Bergson and Deleuze, is a continuous and impenetrable concept (Mlambo 2024). However, philosophers like Foucault disagree (Mlambo 2024). African ontologies reflect nature, discussions on ancestors, and land as concepts that form history. With these dynamics in mind, a decolonial and African dynamic of church history and the history of Christianity must be formed.

Being part of the Global South, South Africa in particular, I see it as pertinent to explore an overdue dynamic in more detail. The below article is an attempt to expand my previous work on spatialisation of church historical methodology and present Africanised ideas for historical epistemology and methodology. Using Foucault's concepts of discontinuity and embodiment as well as African ontologies, this article explores and discusses other new dynamics in historical methodology. Firstly, the article provides an overview of modernity and postmodernity and their effects on the discipline of history as well as Southern African historical methodology and historiography and its developments. Secondly, the article analyses Foucault's concepts of discontinuity and embodiment, and African ontologies and their alternative modes of analysis for history. Finally, it proposes new opportunities for decolonial and Africanised storytelling within church history and/or the history of Christianity.

Methodology

The article uses a qualitative methodology and includes document analysis and constructivism. It discusses concepts of time, space, and Africanisation. Furthermore, it engages the disciplines of philosophy, history, and anthropology in order to answer the research question. Finally, it uses materials such as books, journal articles, newsletters, and other publications.

Historical Methodology: Modernity, Postmodernity, and South Africa

I want to start by looking at a quick overview of historiographical discussions from the modern to the postmodern and postcolonial world. I want to follow Denis's process in his 2019 article on postmodern Christian history (Denis 2019), which explores periods of history and methods of storytelling. One may start with the historiography of the modern, where history was seen as a process of objectively reconstructing the past (as can be seen in 19th-century German scholarship) (Denis 2019).

Modernity, Its History and Inductive Reasoning

Modernity is noted by many historians and philosophers as a move away from tradition towards "the expansion of equality … in favour of rationality" (Budraitskis 2024, 3). Taylor discusses a paradigm of understanding modernity as the development of reason

(1995, 24). This development reveals a scientific consciousness based on a secular outlook or the emergence of rationality or logic (Taylor 1995, 24). This worldview emerged during the Enlightenment era in Western Europe from the 18th century. However, there are scholars who challenge or seek to provide nuance to this claim (Conrad 2012, 999). Nevertheless, rationality brought about inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning is known to be essential to the scientific method (Kiaris 2024, 338). Some note that it is warranted to examine the natural world with experimentation to settle on universal principles about it (Kiaris 2024, 338). This inductive reasoning played a role in modern history.

History and Modernity

Modern history was established as a science in German scholarship in the 19th century (Denis 2019, 2). Modern historians believe that a particular telling of the past could claim to have some estimate of the truth if the documents used in the historical methodology pass a test of "authenticity and reliability" (Denis 2019, 3). In the process of establishing the "truth" of history, a modern historian must submit these documents to external and internal criticism (Denis 2019, 3). External criticism looks at the accurateness of the documents while internal criticism explores the believability of the documents (Denis 2019, 3).

Therefore, the methodology of modern history is founded on reason and one neutral truth (Denis 2019, 3). In this view of history, objectivity can be reached by a historian if they remove themselves (Denis 2019, 3).

Postmodernity and History

In contrast to inductive reasoning there is also postmodernism, which is an ontological approach that is based on doubts on the strength of reason in understanding our world (Kiaris 2024, 338). Postmodern thinking promotes relativism and subjectivity, and rejects any universal thinking (Kiaris 2024, 338). In terms of epistemology, postmodernity engages in deconstruction and questions whether a clear, single "truth" exists (Munslow 2006, 2–3).

Novick discusses the positivist ways of approaching history espoused by German scholars such as Von Ranke (more will be discussed on Von Ranke later) (2005, 26). American history scholars began to challenge objectivity after the First World War (Novick 2005, 111). This inaugurated a move towards challenging the epistemology of the history discipline. As the 1960s and 1970s approached, the challenge became a crisis leading to widespread postmodernism (Novick 2005, 417–418).

Munslow discusses postmodernism as a contemporary condition under which we gain knowledge (2006, 2). An argument has been made that the discipline of history has not been fully inductive (Munslow 2006, 3). Even so, the view of the historian as an impartial observer who tells the facts of history "obscures history's real character as a

literary undertaking" (Munslow 2006, 3). Munslow discusses that history in its essence is a particular narrative of the past (Munslow 2006, 3). Mainstream historians may believe that history is a practice that does not have ideology embedded within it (Munslow 2006, 61). History is widely acknowledged to have the gift of referentiality of words in the traditional written archive (Munslow 2006, 62). A "fact" has a text "reference" (Munslow 2006, 62). However, Munslow states this: "The problem is that such a fixation makes it very difficult to view narratives for what they are: meaningful historical explanations in themselves" (2006, 62).

Munslow explores how the foundation of history-telling gives an illusion of "fact-finding" through use of the written archive. However, he states that even the written word is a narrative itself which communicates and gives meaning in subjective ways.

One challenger to "traditional" history is Michel Foucault (Munslow 2006, 63). Foucault did not discuss narrative as subjective but rather challenged the notion that historians could recover the absolute truth of the past (Munslow 2006, 63). In this challenge to traditional understandings of history, Foucault discusses the view of impenetrable time and raises the possibility of accidentals in time and thus that all narratives cannot be said to be based on absolute, universal truth. I will return to Foucault later.

Overall, when a historian makes cultural and epistemological choices, these affect their narrative of the past and this provides possibilities of multiple and marginalised historiographies (Martínez-Vázquez 2013). Furthermore, there has been a move from universalism and a search for objectivity in history and storytelling to questions on different formations of truth/history and an understanding of what Denis calls "provisional, partial and multifaceted" history (Denis 2019).

History Discussions in South Africa

In South Africa, there has been a development of critical inquiry on the act of history as a construction. In the context of South Africa, there have been vigorous debates on what history is, how it should be written, and how historical evidence should be interpreted (Wright 2000, 125). Also, due to the history of South Africa, historians in the 1970s and 1980s (liberals, Marxist, and Afrikaner nationalist historians) had differing views (Wright 2000, 125). Discussions on the construction of history or the past through language began to arise at this time as well (Wright 2000, 126).

In history discussions involving the Christian faith, there have been discussions on construction and interpretation over the last three decades. Lategan writes on historicity and its developments in a book chapter on history and Reformed theology hermeneutics. In the chapter, he states that reason and rational thought found a home in some theological institutions in South Africa (Lategan 2007, 160). Using Stellenbosch University as a case study, he notes the interest between faith and reason and how a historical critical method developed (Lategan 2007, 168). Critical historical research

has been heavily influenced by Leopold von Ranke and his ideas on removing the subjectivity of the historian and letting the past speak on its own (Lategan 2007, 168). In recent times, some have studied Von Ranke's contemporaries who did not lean on these foundations of reason, such as Droysen (Lategan 2007, 168–169). Droysen discusses the object of history, but not in the same way as Von Ranke (Lategan 2007, 168–169). Droysen states the following on the present and the past:

> Observation of the present teaches us how, from different points of view, every matter of fact is differently apprehended, described and connected with others; how every transaction in private as well as in public life receives explanations of the most various kinds. A man who judges carefully will find it difficult to gather out of the plenitude of utterances so different, even a moderately safe and permanent picture of what has been done and of what has been purposed. Will the correct judgment be any more certain to be found after a hundred years, out of the so soon lessened mass of materials? Does criticism of the sources lead to anything more than the reproduction of views once held? Does it lead to pure fact? (Droysen 1897, 6)

This exploration displays doubt or seeking nuance when it comes to "absolute truth." Unlike Von Ranke, Droysen engages the complexity of life and the understanding of it by various individuals. In discussing the individual, Droysen engages that which postmodernity does in the next century: the process of multiple identities producing multiple subjectivities (1897, 7). Droysen does not claim that something did not happen or someone did not exist in the past (Lategan 2007, 169). Rather, he claims that the memory of events or people is interpretative memory (Lategan 2007, 169). Van Tonder states that the historian or history-teller has a representation, and this representation is the way history becomes accessible and makes its way to the public sphere (Van Tonder 2010, 87). Lategan proclaims that narrative, then, is the interpretative remembering of the human past and is a mode of creating and preserving history (2007, 170). Furthermore, he states that historical inquiry possibilities are not found in its critical dimension, but in its interpretive ability (Lategan 2007, 169).

With the above discussion on the construction and interpretation of history, some questions arise. These include: Are all interpretations of the truth equal? If not, how does one judge between them? (Wright 2000, 127). Also, academic history must receive more critique. Historians may write as if they stand outside history, but they and their ideologies are also part of it (Wright 2000, 128). These questions and understandings of ideology provide opportunity in history-telling and a decolonial approach to history methodologies.

In addition to Lategan's discussion of history's interpretive abilities and possibilities, there have been discussions on orality in South Africa. Anthony Balcomb writes on the power of narrative in constructing reality. Narrative is a foundational category in human experience and existence (Balcomb 2000, 49). Also, humans cannot leave without providing meaning to experiences (Balcomb 2000, 49). Humans tell stories not only to understand what has happened in their lives but also to understand what is happening in

the day to day of the present (Balcomb 2000, 50). Stories are the domain of all human beings and not simply trained storytellers (Balcomb 2000, 51). Balcomb suggests, as a scholar in South Africa, that knowledge is meaningful if it placed in the context of a story (Balcomb 2000, 51). Additionally, evidence, facts, and narratives give experiences and events coherence, shape, and meaning (Balcomb 2000, 51). Balcomb states that in knowing the centrality of the story in human experience and communication, there are three things to do in the act of interpreting: listen, identify, and recognise (2000, 54). Scholars of the narrative must listen carefully and seriously (Balcomb 2000, 55) as part of the project of construction. Also, one must identify with stories, understanding that people, events, and things are interrelated (Balcomb 2000, 55). Moreover, it is important to recognise the importance of some stories to some and not to others and the dynamics of this (Balcomb 2000, 61). Hence, the importance of the story or memory of human experience is dynamic and important for story (or history) tellers.

Vosloo mentions the importance of recognising the complications of memory within the written archive during the act of writing history (Vosloo 2017). Furthermore, Van Tonder (2010) writes that history is a sense-making project that is never closed. History is vulnerable to the nuances of memory, and the archive is ambiguous and only answers the questions posed to it. In her dissertation, Van Tonder discusses a responsible hermeneutic for history. Using Lategan's discussion of the construction of history, Van Tonder recommends a hermeneutic or construction of history that aims to bring life (2010, 135). History should allow itself to open up new and meaningful ways to approach life and stories about life (Van Tonder 2010, 135). The past and the interpretations of the past that are given and produced should not strangle history-tellers nor kill life in the people and communities of which they speak (Van Tonder 2010, 135). Rather, the engagement we have with the past must be with the understanding that the past is complex, vulnerable to interpretation, and ambiguous (Van Tonder 2010, 135). Despite this, it must be approached in a truthful manner (Van Tonder 2010, 135).

Overall, understandings of knowledge and how it is gained have developed since the 18th century. Modernity formed inductive reasoning and the search for universal truths. However, there have been challenges to this prevailing way of searching for knowledge. Postmodernity has introduced an opposition to universal truths, and in many ways it has caused historians to think about the construction of reality and history. South African historians have seen and acknowledged these challenges, furthering scholarship on the interpretation and construction of information and the past. Furthermore, stories and memory have been important structures in the South African discussions. The South African past and its opposing interpretations (apartheid and colonialism vs liberation and decolonisation) and opposing theologies (Afrikaner nationalist theology vs liberation theologies) have created a space for nuance in South African academic history discussions. However, there is still opportunity to expand on "newness" in academic history, particularly in the use of African notions of reality in historical inquiry and analysis.

With that being said, this article seeks to explore and discuss evolving ways analysing history, particularly the partnership between time and space and considerations for African ontologies in historical methodology.

Foucault: Discontinuity and Embodiment

In previous work, I have stated that space is a necessary tool for analysis in history methodology (Mlambo 2024). This article aims to expand on this for possibilities of an Africanised historical methodology that can be used in church history or the history of Christianity. In this article, rather than focusing purely on Foucault's thoughts on time, I would like to engage his work on discontinuity and embodiment.

Foucault discusses the concept of genealogy (1984, 76–100). In some of this work, he engages time as a discontinuous concept (1984, 76–100). However, one point I want to engage beyond my previous work is genealogy, its discontinuous nature and interpretative value. Foucault discusses genealogy as the development of human descent over history (1984, 81). In this human descent, there is no smooth development of the past through humanity (Foucault 1984, 81). The development is filled with imperfections, deviations, and coincidences (Foucault 1984, 81). In this path of descent, these imperfections develop human action and experience (Foucault 1984, 81–82). Furthermore, the concept of descent inherently links to the body and experience over history and thus shows embodiment (Foucault 1984, 81–82). The philosophical concepts of descent and embodiment offer a dynamic of the past, which is the foundationally experiential dynamic of happenings over time (and space). The past leads into the present and this history not only happens but is experienced. Foucault communicates a lot of what South African historians above have discussed: history and memory are not simply written aspects but experiential aspects as well. These aspects are not set in stone but are continuously interpreted.

Multiple identities, experiences, and constructs mean that history is able to be interpreted outside the colonial paradigm of reason. The following section details African ontologies and the possible dynamics for an evolving Africanised historiography.

South African and Greater African Ontologies

South African and greater African ontologies (views of reality) challenge the view of the written word as the only source of history but also present different ways of seeing the world. In countering the thoughts of Hegel (1956, 91–93), who discussed Africa and Africans as without thought or knowledge production, Chemhuru writes on the ontological foundations of African knowledge. Chemhuru states that African ontology is characterised with African metaphysical questions, and it is rather apt to say it is engaged with the question of being (2023, 92). The Cartesian view (founded on the statement "I think therefore I am") places emphasis on the individual and individual reason in the journey towards knowledge (Chemhuru 2023, 92). Also, the notion of

existence is based in the individual and thus individualism determines how knowledge is produced (Chemhuru 2023, 92). However, African ontology is opposed to Western Cartesian philosophy (Chemhuru 2023, 92). African ontology is based in communitarian views of society and the self (Chemhuru 2023, 92). Chemhuru takes a particularist approach to African epistemology based on its ontology and argues that each society has a different conception of ontology and approaches to knowledge will also differ (2023, 92). With this in mind, some shared notions include the use of being and reality as forms of producing knowledge (Chemhuru 2023, 93).

Chemhuru marks African ontology as based on the understanding of an ontological hierarchy of beings (Chemhuru 2023, 94). The hierarchy starts with God; spirits and the dead follow, and then there are the living in terms of their seniority, that is, animals, vegetables, and minerals (Chemhuru 2023, 94–95). This design in orientation of each level of being has strong epistemic consequences because human beings then do not exist in an ontological vacuum (Chemhuru 2023, 95). This brings about an understanding that the conception of knowledge in Africa, in its varying degrees, does not lean on one part of existence (reason) but on the whole experience of the world. The spiritual realm is of foundational importance in African ontology; however, it has been objectified in the Western conception of knowledge and the sciences (Chemhuru 2023, 95).

Lajul states that the African philosophical worldview develops the object of knowledge as "being" (2023, 79). The object of knowledge (the object one strives towards in conception of knowledge) is not a material object or a higher level of reasoning but is about "being" or "what is" (Lajul 2023, 79). The object of knowledge is "being," which is material and immaterial. Humans employ both their senses and reason to arrive at knowledge. Thus, the African conception of knowledge appeals to the immaterial (the spiritual) together with the use of the senses and reason. True knowledge, then, is the ability to see the relatedness of everything in the universe.

African ontology has a deeply spiritual characteristic; it has a communitarian structure and also contains a journey towards knowledge based in "being" and experience. An example of this the use of land and space (space being that which is above, below, and either side of human existence). In African conceptions of land, it is not simply an object but something of spiritual significance as a container for life and death. Land is experienced and partnered with to produce food, to bury the dead, to speak to those in the afterlife, and to live in community. Spaces around us are not objects of knowledge but are experienced and travelled through. Moreover, since knowledge is experienced, the stories that exist in African interpretations of the present and the past do not necessarily have a stagnant life. Additionally, they are interpreted in community and in the spaces where human existence is experienced.

I have pointed to Foucault's work on history as differing from traditional understandings of time and have raised the issue of embodiment and scholars seeing space and

embodiment as just as important as time. Also, African ontology is based in being, in the material and the immaterial. Now, I move to suggestions for an Africanised history dynamic for the future.

Dynamics for the Future

With the dynamics of historiography shown by various scholars, history methodology in the Christian faith must evolve and actively reflect that evolution. In theological history, developments have been made in recognising the nuance of memory and interpretation. However, African ontology and the concepts of experience and embodiment must be engaged to show a comprehensive realm of the past found in African experiences and within faith communities and outside of them.

Having developed the discussion above, there are methodological opportunities for methodology in church history and/or the history of Christianity. The first is engaging interpretations of the past in experience. People go through human experiences in community, individually, through spaces and within themselves. Time is not the only conceptual tool for analysis (as I have mentioned). The interpretation of the past must be re-evaluated and evolve to recognise experience as a tool of analysis.

The second is the development of an African archival analysis. In the African ontology, experience and reason exist together. With that being different to the Cartesian model of knowledge, what would that mean for an African based analysis? The recording of experiences from African bodies and their analysis of space and time is an opportunity. Another is the balance between the Western construct of the written archive and the recording of experiences not only through interviews, but methodological choices (such as participatory action research) which involve the history-teller and the object of interpretation of history. This may provide the opportunity to develop a dynamic storytelling and open up differing voices and lenses for storytelling.

Also, history must engage different disciplines in its search for interpretation of the past. The archive is a valid tool. Other social and political concepts and philosophies are also valid in their own right. Historians, particularly those studying Christian faith communities, should endeavour to engage and discuss these concepts.

A decolonial set of storytelling methods in church history or the history of Christianity is emerging. Time is not the only mode of analysis in history-telling. Space is a tool for analysis. Also, the involvement of experience and being calls for a mix of methods that create dynamic African storytelling, found *esibayeni nasendlini yabadala*.[1]

1 I leave this in IsiZulu to express decolonial writing outside of the English language.

Conclusion

Historiography has its own history. Modernity made way for postmodernity and its opportunities and challenges. However, there needs to be a decolonial Africanised historiography. It includes the recognition of experiences in the human existence in the process of history-telling. Also, it includes looking at different archival and interviewing methods for creative African storytelling. Furthermore, it analyses the past using not just the archive but also social and political conceptualisations. These conceptualisations aid in interpreting the human experience, particularly in African communities. An Africanised set of methods opens up the ability to interpret the past through African processes, ontologies, and experiences of life.

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