Week 23, two Biblical Scholars from South Africa visit the Biblical Exegesis Section (ABE) at the Faculty of Theology. Since Centre for Africa Studies (CAS) has a special expertise within this field, ABE has invited CAS-scholars for an interdisciplinary seminar focusing on the role of biblical & religious discourses in the construction of social identities in various African contexts.

**PROGRAM**

13:00  Welcome

13:05-13:30:  Prof. dr. Gerhard van den Heever, Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, UNISA, SA.  
#([Enter]MustFall, Decoloniality, Apocalypticism, and Thinking Religion as Social Definition.

The various #([Enter]MustFall campaigns (i.e., #RhodesMustFall; #FeesMustFall; #ScienceMustFall) encapsulate the highly charged contestations characterizing a particularly burning and troubling period in South African history. The slow economic decline over a period of roughly ten years have accelerated into a two year-long running student protest over the high costs of university education, but also broadened to include other discourses symbolic of the simmering discord, e.g., State Capture, the removal of President Jacob Zuma, Radical Economic Transformation (RET), and Land Expropriation without Compensation (EWC). The persistent discourses link the protests to the failure of the promises of the 1994 compromise that saw the inauguration of the new South Africa. At the same time, the protests also pick up on another exclusion, i.e., the vestiges of colonial knowledge regimes and cultural alienation, hence the strong insistence on decoloniality in higher education and decolonizing knowledge production. This paper interprets these recent events in South Africa as symbolic revolts through a Barthesian theory of myth. Placing these ‘symbolic revolutionary’ discourses in comparative perspective (inter alia with reference to early Christianity, and Afghanistan and Iraq under the Taliban and ISIS), it is argued that they evince an apocalyptic rhetoric of purification as the simplification of the social aggregate. As such, this demonstrates the role of ‘religious’ discourses in the construction and deconstruction of social identities.
Violence and Religion in Zimbabwe. Or: How to Deal with Ancestors & Gods in a Democratic Nation?

The presentation argues that the conceptualization and dealing with political violence among rural communities in Zimbabwe cannot be separated from their religion: that is, the discourse about the divinized, paternal ancestors as well as the rituals through which the communities relate to their traditional gods. In Zimbabwean culture, like in many other African communities, ordinary, daily life is believed to be under surveillance from the divine. Far from being dead and buried, ancestors are alive and active within the daily – as well as the extraordinary – events that affect the community. Thus politics is not outside the reach of ancestors; on the contrary, the gods elect and keep the leaders in power. Churchgoers, for their part, may pray to the Christian God to change the violent, political leaders; yet they typically hesitate because God, in his supreme power, sustains the present structures of power.

With reference to Zimbabwe, this presentation explores ideas of power, violence and religious rituals that seek to make meaning of the apparently divine violence present in the ordinary political violence. Scrutinizing the rituals that manage to keep the communities going, I ask: When political, household leaders perpetrate violence, how do the community negotiate with it when it is simultaneously seen as divine violence? Specifically, facing the biblical depiction of the Christian God as benevolent to his believers, how is the Bible and its narratives used to interpret and negotiate the situation?


In the crypt underneath Elias' Church in the center of Copenhagen, the Night Light Café is found – an interdenominational café, which is open during the night for women working in street prostitution. The users of the café are primarily Nigerian women, who have constituted a significant group among the sexworkers in European cities since the beginning of the 00-ties (and increasingly during the years of recession). Many of these women are devout Christians, which inevitably prompts the question how they understand their identity as migrant sexworkers in light of their Christian tradition. An interdisciplinary approach, which combined ethnographic fieldwork, ritual studies and exegesis, managed to shed light on the narratives that made the women's life meaningful. Especially, the Biblical Exodus-tradition was at the fore in the women's self-perception. Like the Israelites were tested in the desert before their entrance into the Promised Land, the women understood their present trials in the streets of Copenhagen as a divinely ordained task. The issue at stake was whether they managed to go on as breadwinners of their – often broken – families back in Nigeria. In addition, the research project suggests why the governmental and NGO's humanitarian repatriation programs do not work. In a worldview framed by biblical apocalypticism and computer game lingo, the women perceived the social workers at these programs as foes and sometimes even as delegates from the Devil, and the people, who helped them to Europe, as co-operating helpers. Thus if the exit-programs are to be successful, they must take the women’s as breadwinners seriously.

EVERYBODY WITH AN INTEREST IN THE SUBJECT IS WELCOME

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