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James Walters

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Religious imaginations: religious literacy as the reading of signs

James Walters

London School of Economics, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Drawing together Charles Taylor's idea of the social imaginary and the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, this article develops an account of religious literacy as the expansion of imagination. It argues that a conventional description of 'world religions' is reductive and essentialised, while the counteracting focus on instances of 'lived religion' fails to do justice to the organising power and scope of religious traditions. Both approaches draw on an imaginative framework of signs that shape the believer's understanding of the world and their place within it. Religious literacy is an awareness of the key features and contours of these contrasting imaginative landscapes. Seeing religious traditions in these terms gives a better account of how they can be pathologized as they are drawn away from the mystical, analogical reading of signs that characterises any religious imaginary. To illustrate the theories set out, two contrasting examples of the Christian imagination are explored: American Christian Nationalism and the Forest Churches of Ethiopia.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Improved religious literacy is increasingly called for in a number of areas of policymaking and public life. Religious literacy can be seen as a form of religious education and must grapple with similar pedagogical questions. But as a basis for policymaking or political decision-making, it requires a more empathetic approach, challenging some of the fundamental assumptions of actors formed in secularised cultures. It needs, in addition, to make sense of the diverse expressions of religion in the public sphere, including pathological forms, without dismissing them as somehow non-religious aberrations. The 'religious imaginations' approach set out in this article is grounded in the author's own experience of providing religious literacy to diplomats and in extracurricular programmes to university students across social and political sciences. It seeks to trace the fundamental ways of thinking and being that characterise different religious traditions, enabling the learner to see how these are manifest in different contexts and communities. Two case studies are used to illustrate the utility of this approach to

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CONTACT James Walters j.walters2@lse.ac.uk London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

policymakers and other practitioners in public life. The first considers the rising religious nationalism which, though highly politicised, still needs to be taken seriously and addressed on religious terms. The second examines a form of religious expression, in a region profoundly affected by deforestation, that offers potential for engaging faith communities in responding to the climate crisis.

Introduction: re-imagining religious literacy

In the summer of 1966, the American lawyer and lay theologian William Stringfellow spent several weeks travelling with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus through the towns of New England and New York State. This trip reinforced a lifelong fascination with the circus and his unconventional belief that these travelling communities powerfully communicate themes at the heart of the Christian faith. In essence, Stringfellow saw the circus as a parable of the new society – the Kingdom of God – heralded in the gospels by Jesus. 'This common enterprise of multifarious creatures called the circus', he wrote, 'enacts a hope, in an immediate and historical sense, and simultaneously embodies an ecumenical foresight of radical and wondrous splendor, encompassing, as it does, both empirically and symbolically, the scope and diversity of Creation' (Stringfellow 1982, 88).

Stringfellow saw this unlikely communication of Christian hope in several of the circus's attributes. First, the circuses of his day contained the diversity of creation in both animal and human life. He therefore saw it as an enactment of Christian universalism: the overcoming of divisions and the inclusion of those whom society stigmatises, such as those with unusual bodies or abilities. But most of all it was in the performance of the circus that Stringfellow saw an articulation of the gospel. Fundamentally, whether through walking the high wire, taming lions or being fired from a cannon, 'humans are represented as freed from consignment to death . . . The circus performer is the image of the eschatological person – emancipated from frailty and inhibition, exhilarant, militant, transcendent over death – neither confined nor conformed by the fear of death anymore' (Stringfellow 1982, 89–90). To use John Milton's famous phrase, the circus shows us 'paradise regained' (Milton 2022, first published 1671).

Stringfellow's unusual analogy introduces for us the idea that the essence of Christianity might be more powerfully communicated by a system of signs (the circus with its performers, actions and spectacle) than by more conventional description. He also wrote extensive prose on a number of matters pertaining to the Christian faith. But his fascination with the circus suggests his belief that if we really want to go deeper, we need to think more imaginatively, engage the symbolic and attend not just to words but also to signs. Religious traditions are sign systems.[1] Stringfellow helps us understand this through an analogical sign system (the circus) which is an approach that will be explored further later. But he also writes about the explicit semiotics of Christian life and practice itself. Following the more direct, narrative hermeneutics emerging at this time from such theologians as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he conceives of the Bible as a system of signs in which he gives particular elaboration to the significance of 'principalities and powers' (Ephesians 3.10) as representations of ungodly forces in the world. In the practice

of Christian life, he describes how the Eucharist signifies (in perhaps less colourful ways!) the same eschatological meaning as the circus, as it 'portrays for the rest of the world an image of the Last Supper, of which Christ Himself was Host, and is also a foretaste of the eschatological banquet in which Christ is finally recognised as the Host of all men' (Stringfellow 1966, 154).

This paper seeks to reconceive religious literacy along these lines. Simply exploring a religion as a body of knowledge or a set of ideas and practices only takes us so far. To understand the perspective of the religious other, we need to enter into the imaginative framework of signs that shape a person's worldview and motivate their thoughts and actions.[2] The term imagination is, therefore, used here in the sense of an all-encompassing system of meaning through which the immediate is interpreted. My usage is closely aligned with Charles Taylor's definition of a 'social imaginary' as a 'largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our world show up for us in the sense they have'. Likewise, Taylor suggests that such a 'background' cannot be reduced to propositions in language: 'It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature. That is another reason for speaking here of an imaginary and not a theory' (Taylor 2004, 25).

After establishing the concept of religious imaginations, I will show how this approach to religious literacy helps us to make sense of the distortions of religion in the contemporary age, juxtaposing these phenomena with the essential mystical depth of authentic religiosity. I then explore two contrasting examples of the Christian imagination – American Christian Nationalism and the Forest Churches of Ethiopia – to illustrate how religious imaginations help us interpret divergent instantiations of a nonetheless coherent and recognisable tradition.

Imagination conceived as signs

Why speak in terms of signs when seeking to convey the nature of a religious imaginary? The language of the imagination is a language of images in the mind.[3] These images are not self-evident in meaning. They make sense through interrelation, both our interrelation with the social groups that construct sense and meaning in all aspects of our lives, and the interrelation of the images to one another. It is these insights that form the basis of the Linguistic Turn in philosophy (Rorty 1967) and the understanding that how we perceive and describe things (including our own minds) is less rationalist and empirical than scientific modernity might lead us to think.

Theories of interpreting the interrelation of signs within the Continental tradition stem principally from Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss linguist, whose *Course in General Linguistics* (1959, original French edition 1916) became the founding text of French semiotics (or, as Saussure prefers, Semiology). Saussure provides the central definition of the sign as comprising a signifier (image) and a signified (meaning). He rejects the representationalist view that the sign is given meaning by its association with an idea that exists apart from language. Rather, signs find their meaning in relation to one another. His intention was principally to elucidate the signification of words within the system of language, but the implications of this approach for broader sign systems (art, visual culture, consumer capitalism, dreams) were immediately realised by other thinkers

(notably Barthes and Lavers 2009; Lefebvre and Moore 1991; Merleau-Ponty and McCleary 1988). In all these domains, semioticians have argued that there is no realm of distinct thought that constitutes signs. It is in within the system of signs itself that meaning is derived.

To return to the field of religious understanding, each religious tradition is a complex system of signs: religious symbols, actions, icons and idols, parables, stories, words, rituals and so on. We can consider the meaning of these signs in different ways. But I will draw on two fundamental elements of Saussure's thesis that shape the distinctiveness of the religious imaginations approach.[4] First, Saussure suggests that language can be considered in two ways: as a system (*langue*) or in its realisation (*parole*) (De Saussure 1959, 7–17). Realisation considers meaning within the moment of expression. In the field of religious education, we might consider this as the approach of 'Lived Religion'. Rather than seeking to grasp a whole tradition or a whole religious outlook, lived religion considers expressions of faith as manifest by individuals and communities in particular contexts. This has deconstructed the more essentialised 'world religions' approach of conventional religious studies. It has introduced an understanding of the radical particularity and diversity of religious life and in turn legitimises the diverse religious and non-religious opinions in the religious studies classroom. The downside has been a loss of the sense that it might be possible to speak meaningfully about identifiable religious traditions at all. This dichotomy between the individual believer and the larger institutions of religion is always a conundrum for the study of religion. Faced with the reality of 2.4 billion Christians worldwide who manifest expressions of Christianity that may barely be recognisable to one another, can we discern any commonalities that mark out authentic Christian life?

Saussure's alternative approach (langue) was to consider the rules that govern particular speech acts. This is the system of language that makes speech possible. Again, to transfer into the religious arena, this approach would seek to interrogate what makes particular expressions of Christianity authentically Christian.[5] To approach religious literacy in this way should not mean attempting to encapsulate the totality or essence of Christianity in a set of propositions or ideas. Rather, it seeks to trace the contours and key features of a discernibly Christian landscape. It asks what is fundamental in the Christian sign system. This is what the religious imaginations approach to religious literacy seeks to achieve, not denying the importance or radical diversity of individual expressions of faith, but rather seeking to illuminate the fundamental system on which they draw.

The second distinction that Saussure highlights is between synchronic and diachronic approaches to linguistics (De Saussure 1959, 79–100). Synchronic studies analyse the instantaneous structure of language at a given time. Diachronic approaches look at the historical development of the language over time. Saussure prioritised the former since, while history is important, 'the synchronic viewpoint predominates, for it is the true and only reality to the community of speakers' (1959, 90). Again, this distinction points to divergent approaches in religious education. Many faith traditions are taught chronologically from their myths of origin through their historical development to the present day. This can result in an overemphasis on religion as a historic phenomenon or fail to see how faith makes the past present in the daily actions of the believer. In contrast, religious imaginations attempt something

similar to the instantaneous structural approach. How is the reality of Christian life and witness manifest through this system of signs in particular times and places? In this way, it retains the focus on lived religion, manifest in believers in different ways, but it keeps more strongly in view an understanding of how these manifestations draw on the organising frameworks of received traditions. Religious subjectivity is not free-floating; it is constructed within the system of signs that is fluid but still determines its shape and parameters.

Central to our approach, therefore, is the plurality of instantiations that are possible within a particular religious tradition. We could think of the religious imagination as the 'unstructured and inarticulate' set of signs that Taylor describes, sitting in the middle distance. This is then drawn in two directions: up and down. It is drawn *up* into the 'tidied up' narratives of the 'world religions' that we now recognise as significantly shaped by Western projections. Similarly, they are being drawn up into the politicised religious nationalisms which build on these essentialisations and that we now see in India, Russia, Israel and many other countries. These too are simplifications using the signs of religion to bolster political ideology. More commonly, they may just be drawn up into the codified creeds and dogmas of global religious institutions. However, these imaginations can also be drawn *down* into 'inhabitable stories', multiple expressions of a tradition that vary across context, culture and time. In other words, they are drawn down into the myriad expressions of lived religion.

Let us take Hinduism as an example to illustrate all that has been set out in this section. Hinduism encompasses devotion to innumerable deities, a large and diverse body of Vedic texts, multiple rituals, belief systems, practices and pilgrimage sites. Unlike most of the world religions, it has no single founder and few sources of centralised authority. Hinduism is, therefore, perhaps most susceptible to the critique that religion as a category was a 17th Century Western construct, imposed on diverse phenomena encountered by colonialists. Writing in 1951, Catholic priest Hubert Mascarenhas observed, In modern parlance, it is customary to speak of many religions and therefore also of the 'Hindu religion'. Actually, according to Hindu doctrine, there is only one religion for all men, that, namely, which is constituted and defined by man's relation to the infinite (cited in Lash 1996, 10). Hinduism might, therefore, appear to lend itself to an attention to *realisation*, the 'lived religion' of its diverse adherents, particularly when considered through a decolonised lens. But there is, nonetheless, a system at work, a network of images, texts and practices that Mascarenhas's personalist definition might appear to ignore. Gavin Flood refers to these as 'the prototypical forms of Hindu practice and belief' (Flood 1996, 7). Personal piety in Hindu culture is not invented by the individual; it draws on a wider sign system to which we need to attend. And for better or worse, the categorisations of 'world religions' are now impossible to shed as they exert their own influence on the cultures they initially described. The term 'Hinduism' may have been invented in the colonial era, but it has long been owned by adherents, including as an oppositional identity to colonial British rule.

Similarly, the diachronic approach that Saussure describes would be fruitful in unpacking the meaning of the Hindu tradition. Tracing its origins in ancient Indian history and its development through time would give a better understanding of this evolving worldview. But this might seem over-narrated and distanced approach to a living tradition. Synchronic instantiations enable us to see how Hinduism is manifested

in different places and times, whether that is the life of a Hindu monastery in the Himalayas or a British-Indian family living out their faith in the Hindu diaspora.

All instantiations are drawing from this same middle-distance imaginary. We have seen how the post-Enlightenment categorisation drew the Hindu imagination up into a species of the genus that became 'world religions'. That process has continued as we have seen the development and popularisation of Hindutva, an ideological form of this imagination that seeks to exert Hindu hegemony over India. It particularly draws on a Hindu semiotic (its orange turbans, its temples on contested sites) as badges of belonging and symbols of political power. But there are multiple other instantiations that draw the Hindu imagination into the daily habits of personal, family and communal life, including more inclusive political visions. In sum, Hinduism is a vast system of signs that is complex, even cacophonous, but not incoherent. Improving our literacy of it means understanding how these signs are put to use in different instantiations of the system, whether they be the overarching but reductionist ideology of Hindutva or the myriad expressions of communal and personal piety of lived Hinduism.

Distortions of religious imagination and the mystical alternative

This theory of how religious imaginations function in societies enables us to account for diverse expressions of religion, including those we might want to label as 'good' and 'bad'. We may consider them bad in terms of their faithfulness to the meaning of the sign system on which they draw and/or bad in terms of the political or moral purposes towards which this expression of faith is directed. This is important because contemporary religious education and religious literacy initiatives find it difficult to deal with pathological forms of religion. Most often this is because learning about religion has become fused with agendas to foster inclusion and cohesion among learners or in the wider community. This makes it uncomfortable to touch on a tradition's shadow side or the destructive ways religion is used. It is tempting to say, 'This is not real Islam/Hinduism/Christianity', raising difficult-to-answer questions about who gets to define legitimate and illegitimate expressions of faith.

Semiotic thinking provides us with ways of understanding religion's more troublesome manifestations. Religious imaginations are living systems of signs that evolve to form new significations. This is how new understandings of doctrine develop or rituals evolve to be more inclusive or meaningful in a contemporary context, but some instantiations of the sign system might be too rigid or enclosed. Religious ultraconservatives attempt to fix both signs and their meaning in static form. They insist that signs can only signify one thing, which does not change over time. Roman Catholic traditionalists, for example, insist that only the Latin mass can truly signify Christ in the Eucharist. Muslim conservatives insist that only by wearing a headscarf can a woman signify her piety. Sign systems also overlap with other systems forming new connections and generating new meanings through encounter. In the case of religious imaginations, these are encounters with other religions and secular systems of thought which generate new insights and new relationships. Sectarianism seems to shut down this process, closing the system of signs off to others. Sectarians insist that the purity and exclusivity of the system must be maintained.

Within both these phenomena, religious imagination can be distorted by a process of hollowing out. Jean Baudrillard is most famous for describing how, within an age of mass communication and hyper mobility, signs have become cut off from what they once signified. He describes postmodern society as dominated by simulacra, empty signs that no longer have the cohesive power of ancient symbols (Baudrillard and Gane 1993; Baudrillard and Glaser 1994). As I have discussed elsewhere,

> In the present age, the dangers of simulacral religious practice are widespread. There has been a shift in many of the world faiths towards particular visual signs of religious affiliation … The need to defend religious signs in the visual realm is perhaps indicative of a complex age when it is no longer easy to map deeper religious identity onto the shape of social, family and personal life. (Walters 2012, 39)

This process has intensified in recent times as these empty religious signs have been politicised by religious nationalist movements. Whether it is Donald Trump holding a Bible outside St John's Church in Washington during the George Floyd protests, Vladimir Putin lighting candles in a Russian Orthodox Church or Narendra Modi offering prayers in Hindu temples, the sign systems of religion are being evacuated of spiritual significance as they are corralled into populist political ideologies.

It may be wrong to describe such simulacra as entirely empty of religious significance. We should not uncritically adopt a Western bifurcation of religion and politics, as if faith can and should always be divorced from political participation. But it should be in the nature of authentic religious imaginations that they draw us into depths of contemplation and transformation. Signs of faith should not stay at the surface level or serve as screens onto which we merely project our own will. In the words of theologian Jean Luc Marion (1996), they are 'signs that give'. While an idol submits itself to our projections, an icon exhibits a 'kenosis of the image' that has some transformative effect on us.

This mystical, iconic quality of the religious sign comes, in part, from an ambivalent, enigmatic quality. This is the opposite of the ultraconservative fixing of the sign's meaning. A religious sign may signify multiple things, or its meaning may be hard to pin down and subject to interpretation. This takes us back to the sign system of the circus, used by Stringfellow to communicate the meaning of the Kingdom of God. Analogical sign systems are common in religious traditions. Stringfellow follows the example of Jesus himself in describing the Kingdom through multiple parables: a mustard seed, a farmer who scatters seed on the ground, hidden treasure, a pearl of great price. Other traditions share this use of the analogical mode. The idea of a universe sustained by an infinite God is expressed in a Hindu mythology with the famous analogy of the turtles. A man is told that the world rests on the back of an elephant which rests in turn on the back of a turtle. Asked, what did the turtle rest on? 'Another turtle'. And that turtle? 'Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down'.[6]

Mystical texts of all religions are full of ambiguous, often analogical, signs. The mystical writer Evelyn Underhill groups these signs into three categories that each speaks to a deep human longing (Underhill 1999, 129–148). The first are signs of a lost home, a 'better country'. She cites the Sufi poet Farid ud-din 'Attar's 'Conference of the Birds' in which the birds of the world gather, and the wisest of the birds, the hoopoe, tells them that they must journey through seven valleys to reach the blessed land of Simorgh. When 30 of the birds finally reach the land, they discover that they themselves are Simorgh.

Second are signs of the longing for love. Here, she traces the metaphor of marriage in the Christian tradition from the Song of Songs in the Old Testament to the Twelfth Century Richard of St Victor's analogy of the mystical ascent to the four stages of betrothal, marriage, wedlock and fruitfulness. Third are signs of the craving for perfection and here she analyses the symbolism of alchemy in mystical texts such as those of the Sixteenth Century German mystic Jakob Böhme. Just as the physical alchemist brings forth the latent gold, the perfect metal, so the spiritual alchemist brings forth the latent perfection of the human soul.

To sum up this section, the capacities of religious imagination are being diminished by a limiting of semiotic depth and breadth. Religious sign systems are being ossified and enclosed in sectarian and ultraconservative forms of religion. They are simultaneously being emptied of meaning as they are politicised and cut off from spiritual practice. Traditionally, the mystical dimension of religion has resisted this kind of reduction, insisting on a capacious and often enigmatic range of signification. It is often remarked how Sufism has declined under modern, more literal Islamic renewal movements. But modernity has had this effect on the mystical traditions of all religions. One reason for using the term 'imagination' as the primary approach to religious literacy is to hold this authentic mystical spirit in view.

Two case studies in the Christian imagination

To conclude this paper and further illustrate the theories set out, I am going to explore two instantiations of the Christian imagination. They are extremely divergent in origin and character, one stemming from the reformed Christianity of the West, the other from the Oriental Orthodoxy of East Africa. Both could be studied through the tracing of these histories in the diachronic manner. But following Saussure, I want to read them as contextualised arrangements of the Christian sign system that draw on similar imaginative themes and images in highly divergent, even opposing ways. I would suggest that the first reflects the 'hollowing out' trend of contemporary politicised religion while the second retains more authentic mystic, analogical qualities. In highlighting these two examples, I want to demonstrate how particular expressions of faith draw on their wider sign system in manifestations of the same religion that can be more or less faithful to the tradition's potential for rich, transformative signification.

Christian nationalism in the United States of America

American Christian Nationalism has received wider attention since the presidency of Donald Trump and his explicit appeal to this influential portion of the American electorate. In years when the proportion of Americans that affiliate to no religion has seen quite dramatic growth,[7] there has been an opposing surge in the prominence and power of Americans who believe that the health and success of their nation is dependent on the explicitness of its Christian identity. As Whitehead and Perry point out, this has little to do with implementing 'Christ-like' policies, or upholding the traditional notions in civil religion such as God's demands for justice, mercy and good stewardship. Rather, 'it includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and

heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious' (Whitehead and Samuel 2020, 10).

Nonetheless, this form of nationalism draws on the Christian imagination in various respects and deploys some of Christianity's key signifiers, particularly the Kingdom of God and the saviour figure. Ideas of the Kingdom as the eschatological fulfilment of God's purposes are pervasive in Christian Nationalism, but in a very different sense to those signalled in Stringfellow's image of the circus. Whitehead and Perry put this imagery into two theological categories. First are the 'postmillennial' Christian Nationalists who 'believe that Christ's kingdom is already established on earth, and thus his followers should bring every aspect of American civic life under his reign'. Then, there are the 'premillennials' who believe that 'the world will become increasingly corrupt until Christ returns to rescue the faithful, followed by his millennial reign on earth' (Whitehead and Samuel 2020, 11). For both groups, the Kingdom is in some sense conflated with the nation of America as the arena within which God's ultimate purposes are fulfilled. This draws on older ideas of America as 'a promised land' or 'a city on a hill' (both biblical images), but true to the ultraconservative trend set out in the last section, it overly concretises the symbolism. It wants to say that the sign of the Kingdom refers to America and America alone (Alberta 2023).

Within this schema, Donald Trump has taken on a unique status as the one who defends and advances America's Christian identity and, therefore, the coming Kingdom of God. To say this is a messianic role is no exaggeration. Jesus is not just a historic figure in Christianity, but a living sign whose return will inaugurate the Kingdom. Conflation of Trump with aspects of Christology goes well beyond the slogan 'Jesus is my saviour, Trump is my president'. Iconography (particularly online memes) and messianic language draw explicit associations between Trump and an archetypal saviour figure. In reconciling the ironies of according such exalted theological status to a man of questionable Christian credentials, some evangelicals have drawn parallels between Trump and the Persian king Cyrus who allowed the return of the Jews to the promised land following their exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. This also has messianic connotation since Cyrus is referred to as the Lord's 'anointed one' (the literal meaning of 'messiah') in Isaiah 45.1 (Denker 2022, 44). This is comparable to the ways Vladimir Putin has identified himself with the Russian saviour of Christianity foretold by the 19th century philosopher Ivan Ilyin (Snyder 2018, 24–26).

All this is a clear distortion of the Christian imagination and reflects what many are now referring to as 'Christianism' (Cremer 2022), a politicised identitarian faith that has little interest in conventional or historic ways of interpretating the meaning of the Christian sign system. Its use of the signs of the Kingdom and of a Christic saviour figure are simulacral in the Baudrillardian sense, cut off from substantive Christian referents. Nonetheless, its adherents understand themselves to be Christian, and Christian Nationalism's use of the Christian semiotic system makes it impossible to say this has nothing to do with the Christian imagination. It is undoubtedly an instantiation of the Christian sign system. Perhaps, the importance of recognising this lies in the imperative to challenge and correct it from within the Christian imagination rather than simply on secular political terms.

The forest churches of Ethiopia

The second instantiation of the Christian imagination is from an ancient tradition that has been given a new relevance and focus in the face of climate emergency. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church traces its roots back to the fourth century and is amongst the strongest Christian presences on the African continent prior to the colonial era. Its church buildings are typically surrounded by a forested area (Reynolds et al. 2017), which has made the Church subject of attention in recent years as clergy have worked with biodiversity specialists to preserve these forests in the face of encroaching agricultural deforestation and desertification (Dodds 2021; Wassie Eshete, Teketay, and Powell 2005). Motivation here has not simply been contemporary environmentalism but arises from core beliefs about the integration of the sacred space of worship with the natural world. One priest remarks, 'Every plant contains the power of God, the treasure of God, the blessing of God. So when someone plants a tree, every time it moves the tree prays for that person to live longer'.[8]

The church buildings are constructed from the trees of the forests and these wooded islands in the desert are themselves understood to be part of the sacred space, evoking the imagery of the Garden of Eden. The church buildings are architecturally modelled on the temple in Jerusalem, one of a number of ways in which this branch of Christianity has retained elements of Jewish practice. This may be linked to the myth that the Ark of the Covenant was brought from Jerusalem to Ethiopia in the reign of King Solomon, and each church is presented by the bishop with a *tabot*, a representation of the ark that serves as the altar. These traditions also have resonances with the Genesis story as the location of the Jerusalem temple, Mount Moriah, is held by some to be the site of the Garden of Eden.

The semiotics at work here, therefore, evoke another imaging of this central Christian sign, the Kingdom of God, in this instance a restored paradise. The garden which was lost to Adam and Eve is recreated as the Garden of the Resurrection within which Christian worship takes place. This vision of a renewed and integrated creation is also drawing on fundamental aspects of this Church's theology of Christ. The name of the Church, 'Tewahedo', means 'being made one' and refers to the divergence of the Oriental Orthodox from the Council of Chalcedon, accepted by the majority of Christendom, which asserted the dual, consubstantial natures (human and divine) of the incarnate Christ (Crummey 2006, 459). The Ethiopian Christians followed the Monophysite (or Miaphysite) view which affirms that Christ had one fully integrated nature.

This theology may underpin a generally less dualist tendency in these churches: between the sacred and the natural world and between the human and the non-human. As the words of the priest quoted above suggest, God is at work, not just in the lives of humans but in the natural world, and particularly in trees. Again, this draws on a rich Christian symbolism of trees, typical of the mystical way of reading signs explored earlier. Principally, of course, it alludes to the Tree of Life that stood at the heart of the Garden of Eden. The cross of Christ is often depicted as a recreation of this sign, a tree whose fruit (the crucified Jesus) gives life to the world. Christian icons also depict Jesus as arising from the (family) tree of Jesse, and as a tree himself, the 'True Vine' as

which he describes himself in John's Gospel. We can see, therefore, how a rich semiotics of the Kingdom and of Christ as cosmic redeemer is drawn upon in this ancient tradition as it addresses the challenges of current times. This is an example how the Christian imagination interacts with other systems (of science and climate activism) to adapt in faithful evolutions to contemporary circumstances.

Conclusion

These two instantiations of the Christian imagination have sought to illustrate a number of aspects of the religious imaginations approach to religious literacy set out in this paper. A religious imagination is much more than a creed, a set of dogmas or set of spiritual practices. It is a capacious and opaque hinterland that I have sought to interpret, following Saussure, as a system of signs. Incidental realisations (lived religion) and diachronic analyses (historical studies) are both valuable in deepening our understanding of these traditions. But I have argued that interpreting a manifestation of religion as a contextual instantiation of this wider system has a number of benefits. First, it moves us away from valid/invalid accounts of any particular expression of religion, looking instead at how the religious sign system is used and identifying the nature of destructive distortions, such as we are seeing in the world's rising religious nationalisms. Second, it enables us to consider how religious imaginations interact with other systems (e.g. environmentalism and other religions), leading to adaptations and new expressions of faith. Finally, it helps us think about the power and capacities of religion, certainly for harm, but also for renewal of the human imagination. At a time when so many of our organising systems are at risk of collapse (economic systems, social systems, eco-systems), the rich imaginaries of religion, of which Stringfellow's circus is lively example, can expand our vision of a flourishing and healed world.

Notes

1. Semiotic approaches to understanding religion have been pioneered in anthropology by Geertz (1968, 1973) and in theology by Tillich (1973) and Rahner (1966).
2. The move away from essentialised 'World Religions' in British Religious Education has been defined in recent years by consideration of 'worldviews' as a broader category within which religious perspectives can be understood. This was the approach commended by the Commission on Religious Education Final Report published in September 2018. 'Religious imaginations' shares many features of this approach. However, it departs from it in two principal senses. First, it wants to resist a hyper-subjective approach that could see virtually any broad outlook on life as a religion-like worldview. This might appeal to contemporary sensibilities about respect for diverse opinions, but it diminishes the more deep-rooted, civilisational significance of the religious traditions. This is linked to the second concern, namely that a strong argument can be made that most secular world-views (e.g. Marxist and Humanist) are themselves secularised expressions of a Christian (or other religious) imaginary (see, for example, Gray 2002). This is not to demean their significance or legitimacy, but I would maintain that religious imaginations are operating at deeper levels of the imagination (historical, moral, teleological and metaphysical) and implying an equivalent status to religious and nonreligious worldviews is potentially misleading.

3. Jean-Paul Sartre points out that 'image' is the etymological root of imagination and defines it as 'the understanding, applied to the material impression produced in the brain, that provides us with consciousness of the image' (Sartre, Williford, and Rudrauf 2012, 9–10). He then sets about defining the relation between these images and reality.
4. These core elements of Saussure's linguistics are well summarised in Gary Gutting's reading (Gutting 2001, 216–221).
5. This approach has much in common with George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic view of religion and his theory of doctrine as a discernibly Christian 'grammar' (Lindbeck 1984).
6. This parable is perhaps most famously cited by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1973)
7. Pew Research Center found an increase from 16% in 2007 to 29% in 2021.
8. Aba Gebre Mariam Alene, in Jeremy Seifert's film *The Church Forests of Ethiopia* (December 2019).

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Notes on contributor

James Walters is the Director of the LSE Faith Centre and the LSE Religion and Global Society Research Unit. He is a Professor in Practice in the International Relations Department at LSE.

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