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Teaching with the DACB: reflections of a student

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Since 2019, the DACB project has benefited from the help of student researchers funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at Boston University. They have contributed to the daily work of the DACB while also furthering their academic growth by pursuing individual research projects. Students have written short biographies or collected memories, created annotated bibliographies and researched supplementary resources. For all of them, working for the DACB has opened their eyes to a new understanding of global Christianity—in particular, African Christianity. They also learn about new historical methodologies and narratives, as demonstrated in the following essay.

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Women of Action *and* Women of Faith: An Undergraduate's Perspective on Writing Biography Using a Historical and a Religious Lens[113]

For my final project as a student researcher for the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, I designed a two-week college-level teaching unit on African Catholic female activism. As I examined the intersection of faith and activism, I realized that secular history texts frequently overlook the influence that religious beliefs have on the lives of those working in non-religious contexts. It is ultimately necessary to account for religious beliefs, regardless of what a figure is remembered for, in order to tell the most complete and accurate history.

In disciplines and works striving for objectivity, religion is often dealt with solely in terms of titles and affiliations. A historical account might mention a figure's religious status in relation to their societal interactions or designated cultural role. However, unless that person is remembered for being a theologian or church leader, their personal interactions with faith are frequently downplayed or ignored.

[113] Catherine Devlin is a fourth-year student at Boston University, studying history. She worked as an undergraduate researcher for the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* during the fall 2020 semester as the recipient of a research award from the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (https://www.bu.edu/urop/). Her final research project centered around creating a college-level unit on African Catholic women's activism intended to be part of an introductory course for a Western undergraduate audience.

Discussing religion only as it pertains to official roles or identified denominations has led to overestimates of secularization. In his 1999 article "Secularization, R.I.P.," sociologist Rodney Stark cautions against equating decreased church attendance with decreased faith. He references Iceland, where only 2% of the population attends regular church service, but 81% believes in life after death.[114] Future historians would be inaccurate in drawing conclusions about today's Icelanders based on the premise that the notably low church attendance means a country without faith. In this way, studying religion only as can be proven by affiliation or title ignores religious motivations that are not confined to reportable social positioning.

Furthermore, relying only on records of official church roles to document religious history disproportionately overlooks women's faith, since women are less likely to hold titled positions in many Christian churches. In her 1994 book *Telling Women's Lives: the New Biography*, biographer Linda Martin-Wagner argues that women's stories cannot be forced into the same structure as biographies of men, which measure success through external factors.[115] Recording female stories, therefore, calls for a new methodology that accounts for a deeper exploration of private and inner lives.[116] While a great number of notable African women lack associated secondary sources, the large quantity of primary sources available through collections such as *the Dictionary of African Christian Biography* presents a unique opportunity to explore the complex interactions between individual religious experience and social activism. To attempt to write biographies of Africans who live on a continent where, in 2020, 99.3% of the population was considered religious —without factoring in religious beliefs would be to tell a skewed and incomplete story.[117]

For my lesson plan, I selected environmentalist Wangari Maathai and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as case studies of female activists who are remembered for work outside of religion, yet whose religious beliefs are

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[114] Rodney Stark, "Secularization, RIP," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 264.

[115] Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1994), 4–5.

[116] Michèle Sigg, "Pointillist History and the Essential Role of Biography in the Dictionary of African Christian Biography," in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges,* ed. by D. L. Robert (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2018).

[117] Todd M. Johnson et al., eds., World Christian Encyclopedia, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)

nonetheless significant in their identity formations and activism. Maathai was the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. She created the Green Belt Movement which has planted more than 51 million trees in Kenya by compensating local women to aid in re-forestation.[118] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an award-winning novelist and outspoken feminist, whose TEDx Talk "We Should All Be Feminists" has been viewed over 6 million times on YouTube.[119]

Both women admit to the influence of religion in their lives even though neither held an official church role. Wangari Maathai's formal connection to the Catholic Church is well-documented: she was born to a Christian family, attended St. Cecilia's Intermediate Primary School where she converted to Catholicism, continued on to Loreto Girls Catholic High School, and later co-founded the Kenyan Debt Relief Network with the Catholic Church's Peace and Justice Department.[120] While the Catholic Church played a large role across different stages of Maathai's life, her relationship with it is not easily defined. For instance, in her autobiography *Unbowed* she criticizes missionaries for destroying aspects of Kikuyu culture and contributing to deforestation yet also praises their emphasis on literacy and the creation of schools and hospitals saying, "they did their work well."[121]

Maathai's nuanced view of missionaries echoes scholarly discourse regarding recent perspectives on missionary history. In his 2002 article "World Christianity and the New Historiography," professor of World Christianity Lamin Sanneh argues that framing missionary history entirely as Westerners pushing their culture upon indigenous people perpetuates a top-down approach by describing the local people as passive recipients without agency. This portrayal is clearly inaccurate when one considers the diverse, vibrant Christian communities in Africa today, which are founded and led by Africans. Sanneh

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[118] "Tree Planting and Water Harvesting," The Green Belt Movement, accessed August 16, 2021, http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/what-we-do/tree-planting-for-watersheds.

[119] Adichie does not have a DACB profile, as the biographies on DACB typically focus only on individuals who are no longer living. However, it is not unprecedented for DACB projects to spotlight current African Christian influencers as the *Journal of African Christian Biography* has included stories of living influencers of faith.

[120] Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 10, 61, 268.

[121] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 8.

emphasizes the need for greater African inclusion when speaking about Christian missions saying, "Africans not only planned, directed, and implemented missionary policy, but they also went on to observe, to research, to document, and to reflect in original ways on how to do mission in an African context."[122] Maathai's writings about the positive and negative influences of missionaries in Kenya serves as an example of an African Catholic woman reflecting on the complexities in her own people's faith history in a way that challenges the stereotypical dismissal of missionaries.

Maathai's writings also document her personal spiritual journey and the impact of faith on her activism. *Unbowed* catalogs her various reactions to Catholicism, from being dismayed at the changes made in Vatican II to feeling especially outraged that the police arrested priests and nuns during a political protest saying, "for the government to treat the religious this way was, to me, the lowest level to which the system had sunk."[123] In her 2010 book *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World,* Maathai connects the environmental movement to tenets found across faiths but does not tie these values to a specific religious tradition. In fact, Maathai even explicitly denies Catholic influence on her activism saying, "it is clear to me that when I began this work in 1977, I wasn't motivated by my faith or by my religion in general."[124] Yet Maathai's other writing hints at connections between her work and faith outside of general spirituality. For instance, in *Unbowed* she selects a Bible quote for the epigraph, and she credits her Catholic high school with instilling in her a sense of justice and common good.[125] Further study and close analysis of Maathai's writing could reveal deeper connections between her Catholic faith and activism or could confirm her premise that it is general spirituality (and not a specific faith) that allowed her to enact such remarkable change. Either discovery would provide greater context into the study of Catholicism's impact on African female activism.

Like Maathai, Adichie's writing and speaking on her Catholicism do not present a straightforward narrative. In her 2015 article "Raised Catholic," Adichie reflects on her journey within the Catholic faith from loving the ritual of

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[122] Lamin Sanneh, "World Christianity and the New Historiography: History and Global Interconnections," in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, ed. W.R. Shenk (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 107.

[123] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 82, 280.

[124] Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 13.

[125] Maathai, *Unbowed*, 70.

Mass in Nigeria as a young girl to becoming disillusioned by severe dogma and inequities between clergy and parishioners as she grew older.[126] When Adichie attended Mass after moving to the United States, she found American churches to be overly political. Yet despite her criticism of the Church throughout "Raised Catholic," Adichie ends the article on a hopeful note by saying that she is encouraged by Pope Francis' message of humility and compassion. Unlike Maathai, Adichie praises the changes made by Vatican II, using the council as evidence that more positive change within the Church would not be unprecedented. While Adichie's has been a vocal critic of the Catholic Church, she does not deny the influence of faith in her life. She mentions attending service at churches of different denominations when feeling hurt by the Catholic Church, thus showing her continued spirituality even when she wished to be distanced from the Catholic Church itself. She speaks to the lasting influence of Catholicism on her life saying, "to be raised Roman Catholic is to be inducted into a culture that clings, that slides between your soul's crevices and stays."[127] Further signaling her connection to Catholicism despite her criticism of the Church, Adichie chose to have her daughter baptized in order to give her the option of faith.[128]

Adichie addresses religion when speaking and writing about feminism. She openly acknowledges the sexism within the hierarchy of the Catholic church and, indeed, many churches. In an interview with Paul Elie, senior fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Adichie said, "I think religion … is not a women-friendly institution."[129] Yet she also recognizes the power of religion in reaching women and spreading her message. In a presentation at Johns Hopkins University, Adichie explained that she studies the Bible in order to better understand "religion being the problem...but also being part of the solution" of gender inequality.[130] Another way that Adichie's feminism

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[126] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Raised Catholic," *The Atlantic*, October 14, 2015,

[127] Adichie, "Raised Catholic," 3.

[128] "Award-Winning Author Adichie Explores Faith, Feminism at Georgetown Event," Georgetown University, last modified March 17, 2017, accessed August 17, 2021, https:// www.georgetown.edu/news/award-winning- author-adichie-explores-faith-feminism-at-georgetown-event/.

[129] "Award-Winning Author," Georgetown University.

[130] "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on Religion and Feminism," video, YouTube, posted April 2017, accessed August 17, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JI1MaobpMT8.

reaches beyond academic spheres is through her fiction. Literary researcher Daria Tunca's 2013 article "The Confessions of a 'Buddhist Catholic:' Religion in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie'" argues that Adichie's fiction denounces extremism and increasingly recognizes the political implications of religion. The religious messages and characters put forth in Adichie's books may offer greater insight into the author's own perspectives. As in Maathai's case, scholarly discourse around African Catholicism and activism would benefit from greater inquiries into the relationship between Adichie's faith and feminism.

Creating a lesson plan for the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* was one of the more challenging and rewarding tasks I have taken on as a college student. I ended the project with more questions than answers. While I originally envisioned lessons that instructed, the ultimate product included more discussion and student participation than lecturing as I found myself unable to adequately summarize the dynamic figures I chose to focus on. With that being said, the research process taught me a great deal about how integrity in biographical research requires information about the whole person—including personal beliefs. Religious affiliation does not tell the whole story of one's faith, as shown both through those who have no affiliation yet maintain spirituality and those who do not fully subscribe to the beliefs of their official denomination. Wangari Maathai and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie serve as case studies of female Catholic activists whose work is informed by their faith, yet who do not fully identify with all aspects of the Catholic Church. Telling their story fully and accurately requires looking within.

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