Wolfram Kinzig and Barbara Loose

Introduction

The ongoing debate about postcolonialism and recent events like the toppling of the statues of enslavers in England, the restitution of art looted by France during the colonial era, and the founding of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin have increased awareness in the West and especially in Europe of how historical and contemporary forms of coercion and oppression have impacted societies all over the world.

In the past, research on various forms of bondage and coercion was usually framed in terms of the binary opposition of slavery and freedom. In its research, the "Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies" (BCDSS) of the University of Bonn[1] attempts to overcome this binary opposition as it seeks to address economic, legal, religious, social, and cultural structures of dependency that resist straightforward classification as slavery. In this context, the concept of "asymmetrical dependency" can serve as an analytical tool for studying a wide range of phenomena, including but not limited to slavery. In terms of a preliminary definition, researchers at the centre (Julia Winnebeck, Ove Sutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler, and Stephan Conermann) have proposed the following three markers of asymmetrical dependency in a programmatic article recently published in the *Journal of Global Slavery*:

1. Asymmetrical dependency occurs within relations between two or more actors. The position of an actor can, in principle, be assumed by all entities, i.e., human beings, animals, elements of nature, material artefacts, gods, and spirits.
2. Asymmetrical dependency is based on the ability of one actor to control the actions of another actor and/or their access to resources.
3. Asymmetrical dependency is usually supported by an institutional context in such a way as to ensure that the dependent actors cannot simply change the situation by either going away ("exit") or by articulating impactful protest ("voice").[2]

This approach allows us both to identify different types of dependency and to widen the focus of research in historical, geographical, and interdisciplinary terms, as, for example, it facilitates the study of cultures that have no terminology for slavery or where indistinct but nevertheless potent forms of coercion do not coincide with a particular legal status. More importantly, in the context of this edited volume, the concept allows us to widen the scope of our analysis to include dependencies on a transcendent power (such as gods or spiritual realities) that also lead to the formation of hierarchies, which may be restricted to the metaphysical realm but may also entail

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1 See https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/en [accessed 29.01.2024].
2 Julia Winnebeck, Ove Sutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler and Stephan Conermann, "The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency," *Journal of Global Slavery* 8 (2023): 7–8.

earthly institutional consequences. Winnebeck et al. have explicitly addressed this phenomenon in their seminal article:

> [. . .] one could argue that the assumption that a divine being has instituted a particular social order might both stabilize and restrict A's power over B. Such a belief might reduce the potential for change. At the same time, a divine order demanding a particular behaviour towards others, as in the case of the 'golden rule,' might restrict the scope of violence towards an asymmetrically dependent actor even if societal norms place few limitations upon it. Furthermore, when considering gods, demons, spirits, etc., as actors within relationships of asymmetrical dependency, we might ask to what extent human actors and members of a particular social group claim to hold power or execute control on behalf of these entities.[3]

Within this theoretical framework (which includes further distinctions like those between "sayings" and "doings"[4]), the principal interest of this volume is to show the role of religion, both in overcoming and creating structures of dependency.

The contributors to this volume were asked to address the following questions: where in history did religious agents contribute to the abolition of such structures? Conversely, to what extent were religious agents responsible for and instrumental in establishing social and other hierarchies, be it, for example, between priests and ordinary people or even among believers (such as in a caste system)?

As is often the case in history, there are no simple answers to these questions. On the one hand, the equality of all human beings before God is deeply rooted in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thought. Conversion to one or the other religion has, therefore, often led to the transformation or even the abolition of existing social structures, institutions, and their corresponding dependencies, which, in turn, strengthen the social agency of the members of a given religion. On the other hand, while control, coercion, and constraint of individuals or groups are indeed frequently criticized in religious discourse, it is commonly acknowledged that religious aetiologies have also been used to justify the subjection of individuals and people groups. In addition, throughout history, religious institutions themselves have often mirrored the social hierarchies and inequalities of their surrounding societies by creating similarly rigid systems of dependency within their own institutional, social, legal, and spiritual structures. The (full) realization of freedom and equality is then often postponed to a distant future, to a later life, or even to the afterlife. Moreover, not even the metaphysical world is free of dependencies: almost all major religions envisage hierarchies of gods, angels, and demons in their respective discourses.[5] In Christianity, for example, the New Jerusalem is described as a divine monarchy in which the resurrected humans will serve God as slaves on whose foreheads the divine name is tattooed to indicate that they are God's property (Revelation 22: 3–4).

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3 Winnebeck et al., "The Analytical Concept": 23.

4 Cf. Winnebeck et al., "The Analytical Concept": 16–20.

5 Regarding Christianity see, for example, Winnebeck and Munkholt in this volume: 227–247 and 181–204.

Finally, the question of the role of religion in abolishing but also perpetuating slavery is still a much-debated topic within the historical and social sciences. This topic is all the more pressing in light of the contemporary enslavement of ethnic groups on the basis of their religion, like, e.g., the Yazidis and the Rohingya.

About this volume

This volume collects contributions from the humanities, social sciences, and theology, which deal with the role of religion in overcoming and creating structures of dependency. As previously noted, the contributions formed part of a lecture series designed by Maria Munkholt Christensen, Julia Winnebeck, Barbara Loose, and Wolfram Kinzig held during the 2021–2022 academic year at the University of Bonn. The lecture series was jointly organized by the university's "Center for Religion and Society" (ZERG)[6] and the BCDSS.[7]

Of course, this volume does not claim to be exhaustive. Readers will inevitably notice a certain emphasis on Christianity. However, some contributions that deal with dependency structures in Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism clearly show that our methodological approach is also applicable to societies in which non-monotheistic religions are or have been dominant. As diverse as the authors' research foci are, so too are their approaches to exploring the role of religion in overcoming and creating structures of dependency. Consequently, we have chosen the following thematic sections to organize this volume's contents:

1 God, Satan, and Humankind: Liberation from and Dependency on Supernatural Forces

The articles included in the first section explore how the relations between humans and supernatural forces in sources from the Ancient Near East, the Bible, and early Christian rituals can best be described.

Jan Dietrich's essay on 'Freedom and Dependency in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East' begins with a reflection on the first mythical narratives from Mesopotamia, which describe the creation of humankind as a workforce for the gods (except, perhaps, for the king who is awarded a god-like status). Dietrich then traces 'how the distinction between prototypical humans and the king led to the emergence of the

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6 See https://www.zerg.uni-bonn.de/ [accessed 29.01.2024].

7 Some of the lectures (Hegewald, Kinzig, Munkholt, Winnebeck) are also available online at https://www.youtube.com/@zergunibonn9490 [accessed 01.02.2024].

idea of equality and non-dependency between all humans' as expressed in the Hebrew Bible.[8] The development of a concept of God's sole sovereignty over Israel is seen here as a precondition for the emergence of the idea that 'humans are created as god-like representatives on Earth.'[9]

Ulrich Berges' analysis of the biblical evidence is slightly less optimistic. He sees the 'overcoming and creation of asymmetrical dependencies' in the Bible as 'two sides of the same coin.'[10] In this context, he investigates the semantics of dependency in the Book of Isaiah. Berges points out that, in the Old Testament, the relationship between humans and God is clearly characterized by a hierarchical dependency structure that is dialectical: on the one hand, it is based on the 'liberation of his [God's] people from bondage in Egypt, the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2)', but, on the other hand, it leads to a new kind of divine enslaving, as expressed, for example, in Leviticus 25:42 (tr. NRSVue): 'For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold.'[11] Given this dialectic, apparent linguistic references to human dependency and freedom must be carefully reconsidered, especially in the Book of Isaiah, since they may not express "freedom" but, perhaps, "release from bondage", in which case, submission to the divine Lord may not be free-willed but forced subjugation to a new master.[12]

Berges' careful analysis parallels *Wolfram Kinzig*'s findings regarding Christian baptismal theology. Kinzig explains that in late antique baptismal liturgies and sermons explaining said liturgies, conversion to Christianity was seen as the liberation of the convert from the power of the devil. At the same time, the renunciation of Satan entailed a new form of dependency: the baptismal rites expressed and enacted the absolute submission of the converts to Christ as their new master. Thus, the conversion to Christianity was a 'change of allegiance and replacement of one relationship of dependency with another,'[13] although this new dependency (on Christ) was often praised as an act of liberation.

2 Interactions between Religion and Politics

The second section comprises articles that primarily highlight the complex interactions between religions and the political structures in which they are embedded.

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8 Dietrich in this volume: 12.
9 Dietrich in this volume: 24.
10 Berges in this volume: 27.
11 Berges in this volume: 41.
12 Cf. Berges in this volume: 27–44.
13 Kinzig in this volume: 48.

Ludwig Morenz explains how the development of alphabetic writing in Serabit on the Sinai Peninsula in the early second millennium BCE can be understood as a sign of overcoming the oppression of the Canaanites by the Egyptians. He focuses on the Canaanite "He"-tribe as the likely agent of this momentous invention, which took place in a sacred area dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Hathor. He thus calls into question the prevailing image of the oppressed and uneducated Canaanites and asserts their role as a people who sought to cooperate with the Egyptians but, in the end, followed their own agenda.

In the second article, we turn to Tibet's imperial period (*ca.* 600–850 CE). *Lewis Doney* shows how descriptions of the life of the emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan (reigned 756–*ca.* 800) in later historiographical and biographical sources mirror the rise in status of Buddhist masters. They could gradually 'come to be seen as superior to the royalty on whom they were formerly dependent and so create a social situation that undergirded the dependency of the Tibetan people on their clergy (as the dominant class) for permission to use their land in exchange for taxation.'[14] Doney describes how, with the help of certain narrative strategies, the clergy managed to utilize the power vacuum that existed in central Tibet after the fall of the empire in order to gain a privileged position in society.

Moving into nineteenth-century North America, *Marion Gymnich* traces the picture of religion and its meaning for enslaved people in the antebellum South, using the example of Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). On the one hand, Jacobs focuses on how religion was used to justify the oppression of enslaved people. On the other hand, she emphasizes the absurdity of the enslavers' self-image, who saw themselves as good Christians but acted against Christian values in their treatment of enslaved black people. In this context, the systematic use of religion as a means of oppressing enslaved black people becomes a means of political coercion.

The last two articles in this section focus on religious symbols as expressions of relationships of dependency in the service of political endeavours.

Sabine Feist analyses how, in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, relics of Christian martyrs and saints were used to exert political pressure. The agents in this process could be bishops or emperors who handed over, refused to hand over, or procured relics to demonstrate their own supremacy, create transregional sacral networks, and promote political relations.

While this text is about the *preservation* of spiritually charged artefacts for religious and political purposes, *Julia A.B. Hegewald* deals with their systematic *destruction*. Using the example of the desecration of temples and sacred icons of the Jaina in medieval South India by the then-emergent group of the Vīraśaivas, she describes the

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14 Doney in this volume: 90.

significance of the transformation and destruction of religious artefacts for the manifestation of the power of one religious group over another.

3 Religion and Gendered Dependency

The volume's third section deals with the manifestation of structures of dependency at the intersection of religion and gender.

In her contribution, *Maria Munkholt Christensen* describes social hierarchies, or the lack thereof, within late antique nunneries. Based on monastic rules and hagiographical accounts, she illustrates how women of all strata of society, including enslaved women, could enter monastic communities. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions from these idealized accounts regarding social realities, it seems, nevertheless, that in some monasteries, women from different backgrounds lived in "full" equality with each other, whereas in other communities traditional social barriers were upheld. Furthermore, contrary to what one might expect, enslaved people who contributed to a monastery's maintenance are frequently found in late antique monastic texts.[15]

Sinah Theres Kloß explores the question of whether or not the religious tattoos of present-day Hindu women in the Caribbean, the so-called *godna*, can indeed be perceived as a sign of dependency. While these have long been described as signifying a woman's dependence on her husband and in-laws, they increasingly developed into a unifying symbol of a relational bond between a young bride and her own family, especially her mother, as well as a marker of a certain privileged religious status. Based on interviews with tattooed women, Kloß traces these changes in the interpretation of the *godna*.

4 Religion and the Dialectic of Overcoming and Creating Dependency

The book's fourth and final section addresses the role of religion in overcoming traditional political, social, and legal structures of dependency. It also examines the creation of new religious hierarchies that replace old ones.

Julia Winnebeck focuses on the manifestation of relations of asymmetrical dependencies in the practice of penance and ecclesiastical law as recorded and systematized in Christian penitentials from the sixth to the ninth centuries. She sees penance as an

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15 See now also Johanna Schwarz and Julia Winnebeck, "Sklaven Gottes – Sklaven der Kirche: Der Umgang mit Sklavinnen und Sklaven im Mönchtum," *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 28, no. 2 (2023): 54–57.

'ecclesiastical institution which not only regulated the spiritual practice of both clergy and laypeople but also served as a medium of social control and a gateway to dependency relations such as slavery and bonded labour.'[16] In using this tool of spiritual discipline, the Church played a crucial role in forming and maintaining new structures of religious asymmetrical dependencies.

Michael Schulz examines Bartolomé de Las Casas' argument against the ethical justifiability of enslaving indigenous people in South America. An analysis of Aristotle's notion of *éthos* allows de Las Casas to argue for the equality of all humans. Cultural diversity is acquired and cannot be used to legitimize slavery on the basis of natural differences.

From *Martin Schermaier*'s contribution, we can see that not only Las Casas' argument but the entire debate on liberty in the European philosophical and theological tradition down to Spanish Scholasticism was strongly influenced by Aristotle and how it developed over the centuries. He focuses on the concept of *dominium in se ipsum*, which in the scholastic tradition was transformed from a concept of inner freedom and thus of moral responsibility into a criterion of outer freedom: whoever was the master of his actions could not be completely at the mercy of another's caprice, and whoever acquired ownership of the goods of this world could not himself be the property of another. The scope of these propositions determined contemporary concepts of freedom. In addition, Schermaier points out that some advocates of the equality of all humans had undergone considerable intellectual development in their lifetime; thus, in his early writings, Las Casas argued *in favour* of the 'enslavement of African natives to alleviate the labour shortage in the New World'.[17]

Three centuries later, the Anglican Evangelical William Wilberforce also turned his attention to the question of the justifiability of the slave trade. *John Coffey* explains how this Englishman campaigned for the abolition of, first, the slave trade and, later, slavery in general. Furthermore, Coffey asks why Evangelical Christians were so keen to end the Atlantic slave trade and West Indian slavery. He identifies their eschatological expectations as a key impulse behind their abolitionism. Finally, he discusses how their religion prompted them 'to abolish slavery but also to reinforce colonial dependency'[18] because they considered alleged African "barbarism" to be culturally inferior to European civilization.

In sum, this collection of case studies illustrates the ambivalent role of religion in the history of strong asymmetrical dependencies. The editors hope it may foster further reflection on this history, especially on questions such as: are there religions that promote the political, legal, and social freedom of humans more than others? What is the role of the development and disappearance of religious "fundamentalisms" in this re-

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16 Winnebeck in this volume: 227.
17 Schermaier in this volume: 291.
18 Coffey in this volume: 300.

spect? Does the "enlightenment" of religion make a difference? Does it matter what kind of ideology, doctrine, or theology a religion promotes regarding overcoming and creating structures of dependency, or does the move towards freedom or dependency, ultimately, depend solely on religious practice and politics and on actual power relations within societies? Finally, are societies in which the influence of religion is marginal (such as socialist countries) more or less prone to promoting freedom?

In any case, recent developments such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and again on 24 February 2022, the terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the Israeli military response have made abundantly clear that asymmetrical relations between states and ethnic groups cannot be sufficiently understood without considering the role of religion in overcoming and creating structures of dependency.

Thus, this book is intended as a source of inspiration and a stimulus to incorporate dependency studies in general and the role of religion in particular into established perspectives on social asymmetries.