


# Contemporary study of religion

**Author:**Auwais Rafudeen<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religious Studies and Arabic, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Auwais Rafudeen,  
rafudma@unisa.ac.za

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We live in academically interesting times. In the humanities, much received wisdom about linear progress, about the innate superiority of Western knowledge, about what knowledge itself means, has increasingly come under severe interrogation. This has not only been the result of a greater appreciation of other cultures and their knowledge outlooks prompted by the decolonial turn and its cognates. It has also been caused by the implosion of the popular Western, liberal narrative itself as the world continues to be beset by intertwined political, ecological and medical crises, forcing a re-evaluation of the dominant paradigm.

While the West has historically tended to export this narrative to the rest of the world as a model to be followed, within Europe and America itself, it has an uneasy history. The Enlightenment was almost immediately met by a counter-Enlightenment, optimism was undercut by a pessimistic realism, the view of human nature as a self-sufficient, freely choosing self was complicated by the exploration of deeper human motivations and desires. While the dominant narrative proclaimed the road to be followed, these counter trends worried about its foundations and where it led. And history has appeared to justify much of their disquiet with the progress narrative. Two essays in this collection speak to this underside of Western history, to the work of A. Schopenhauer and L. Feuerbach. In their papers on these thinkers, Northover (2022) and Beyers (2022) show the continuity between the supposedly archaic and the modern: the continuing relevance of myth in modern metaphysics, the continuing need for religion in even outrightly atheist worldviews. As much as it tries to escape the burden of tradition, the modern continues, in various senses, to vigorously inhabit it. Z. Kotzé reverses this focus on the modern through a post-Jungian reading of the Book of Baruch. Yet the principle is the same: the persistence of archetypes throughout history, whether now or then. We never quite break free into a 'future'.

The exploration, or rather empathetic re-exploration, of other worldviews has been a concomitant outcome of the failure of the progress narrative. Different views of self, of community and of temporality are now increasingly recognised. In this regard, Buddhism has often been a natural recourse for many Western intellectuals and spiritual seekers, an antinomian alternative to the huff and puff of modernity. As Mason (2022) shows in his paper on J.N. Finlay, this recourse forces an engagement with the heart and will, and with the sensorial aspects of existence more generally, rather than the mind-centric approach cultivated by modernity. This is the key to opening a new way of the self and its potentialities. But it can be argued that while there has been this thread of profound appreciation of new ways of being and self in modernity, the leap to embracing the temporalities that this might involve is met with greater hesitation. In his paper, Molapo (2022) poses the question: *what if we take the after-life seriously?* That is, not simply as an object of study but as a lived reality. It is impossible, he implies, to understand African ways of being by separating life and death, by an analysis that contains itself within the terms of the former (implicitly assuming 'only this life is real') and disregards what happens after the latter. If we are to truly understand why people in traditional African contexts act in the way they do – a context that continues to reverberate today – then our scholarly theoretical lenses need to not only include the possibility of this temporal shift, but be receptive to it as well. Molapo (2022) here is pointing to a radical shift in consciousness – but one which I think is a natural extension of the underside of modernity and its continued courting of religion, myth and different ways of self.

It is worth noting that the academic space in general is still generous in that its willing to speak to this underside. In this respect, it is perhaps an outlier as an amorphous view of progress continues to hurtle us into an unknown future.

## References

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**Note:** Special Collection: The Contemporary Study of Religion: Philosophical Perspective, sub-edited by Mohammed (Auwais) Rafudeen (University of South Africa).

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Kotzé, Z., 2022, 'A post-Jungian reading of the Book of Baruch', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(2), a6679. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.6679>

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