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STUDIES IN RELIGION 4

De/colonizing Theologies

*Glocal Histories, Contemporary
Challenges, Theoretical Reflections*

Edited by

Judith Gruber

Gertraud Ladner

Ruben C. Mendoza

Rachel Sanchez

Neven Vukic



PEETERS

DE/COLONIZING THEOLOGIES:
GLOCAL HISTORIES, CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES,
THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

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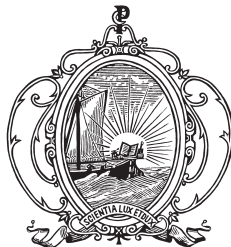
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INTRODUCTION

Judith Gruber, Gertraud Ladner, Ruben C. Mendoza,
Rachel Sanchez, Neven Vukic

This volume is the fruition of the research project of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT), a global collaboration of various Catholic theological associations and groups founded in 1996. As a network, INSeCT aims to foster academic theology and theological research, as well as collaboration among its member societies. Moreover, it highlights the contributions of local theologians in various contexts and promotes fora in which they can engage each other in dialogue.

INSeCT decided that its research theme for 2021–2024 would be, “A People of All Nations: Decolonizing Theologies, Decolonizing the World.” Despite the independence of former colonies, colonial structures continue to persist globally in economic systems, in social, cultural and epistemic relations, and in the church. The triple violence of colonialism (political violence through oppression; economic violence through exploitation; and cultural violence through negation) reverberates in multiple forms in the overlapping crises we face today: environmental degradation, damaged health, racial oppression, and gender injustice. There is thus an urgent need to reckon with the colonial past of the church, to confront its ongoing legacies in the present, and to develop alternative ecclesial visions that challenge and transform the deeply entrenched heritage of colonialism.

As a contribution to the ongoing project of decolonization, INSeCT organized two online lectures (12 October 2022 and 26 March 2023) focused on the research theme. During these lectures, four theologians from different parts of the world reflected on this theme in light of their own contexts. In addition, INSeCT organized a hybrid twin conference, “De/colonizing Theologies: Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges, Theoretical Reflections,” at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and Ateneo de Manila University on 27–30 March 2023. Participated in by theologians from both colonizing and colonized countries, the conference endeavored to move beyond simplistic narratives that either condemn Christianity as hegemonic or seek to reclaim an authentic liberative message at Christianity’s core. Ultimately, the goal was to uncover and give space to more nuanced accounts of how theology is practiced in ways that are intrinsically

ambivalent within the colonial framework. Many of the presentations in both forums are contained in this collection which tackles the process of decolonization, not only in its broader cultural and societal contexts but specifically within the Roman Catholic Church.

Inspired by the 2019 “Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region,” the project responds to concerns similar to those expressed in *Querida Amazonia*. In this post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis calls for a church that respects and learns from the cultural riches of Indigenous peoples, reflecting a move away from colonial attitudes and towards a more inclusive and respectful ecclesiology.

The project’s participants recognized the urgent need to address the church’s colonial past and its persisting impacts today from different contexts, with a critical sensitivity to power discourses, resistance, identity construction, and negotiation, given the fact and on-going effects of colonialism.¹ Because colonialism affects both colonizers and the colonized, the work of decolonization needs to take place from both sides.²

The approach to ecclesial decolonization involves a dual process: first, critically analyzing how theological and ecclesial discourses have historically and contemporarily supported colonial power, knowledge regimes, structures, and practices; and second, constructing theological frameworks that promote the church’s decolonization. This initiative aligns with the vision of *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis emphasizes the need for a church that is culturally diverse yet unified, reflecting a “polyhedron” model of global Catholicism that honors local idiosyncrasies while fostering universal communion.³

Decolonizing theology can be understood as an activity that entails three processes or projects. First, it involves a deconstruction and reconstruction of the relationship between theology and empire with a multi-axial or intersectional view of different identity markers and groups, such as race, class, gender, and religion. It is also concerned with undertaking a critical assessment of how religious difference has provided theological language for colonial discourse. Lastly, it entails a serious consideration of how the colonial and neo-colonial enterprise has affected the environment

1. Pope Francis, “Greeting of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT),” Vatican, May 10, 2024, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/may/documents/20240510-insect.html>.

2. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd edition (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 169; Ania Loomba, *Colonialism-Postcolonialism, The New Critical Idiom* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 12, 19.

3. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, §236.

and vulnerable sectors, such as women, who are most hardly hit by negative effects.⁴

The distinct colonial histories of the Philippines and Belgium influenced the conference's focus on specific colonial legacies and their global-local (glocal) histories. The discussions also extended to how these legacies intersect with contemporary crises, such as gender injustice and the ecological crisis, thus contributing both practical and scholarly perspectives to the discourse on decolonizing the church.

The cases of the Philippines and the Congo represent rich yet underutilized theological resources in ongoing debates on decolonizing theologies. These regions' complex history of colonial encounters, layered syncretism, and vibrant local religious practices provide unique perspectives that challenge and enrich the global theological discourse. Recognizing this, the volume gives a unique platform to these voices, facilitating a deeper engagement with their distinctive insights and contributing significantly to the broader project of decolonization within the church. Through this focused inclusion, the project not only highlights the specificities of the Philippine and Congolese contexts but also amplifies their region's contributions to a more nuanced understanding of decolonization in theological reflection.

On May 10, 2024, INSeCT met with Pope Francis who said the following in his address on that occasion, "As we all know, Tradition is living. Consequently, it must increase and incarnate the Gospel in every land and in all cultures. The Gospel proclaims the event of Jesus, who died and rose again, and is wisdom for the life of all peoples."⁵ While the editors of this book are humbly aware that the various attempts and approaches to decolonizing theologies contained in this work do not represent the polyphony of decolonial and postcolonial theological voices around the world, these offer relevant perspectives that contribute to ongoing decolonial discourses as part of a living tradition that seeks to incarnate the gospel across different lands and cultures among diverse peoples.

1. Decolonizing theologies as a collaborative practice across theological associations

Throughout its history, INSeCT has developed strong collaborations with the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR), one

4. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 127. Kwok describes redoing theology from the perspective of an Asian postcolonial theologian. Her description is summarized and appropriated in relation to decolonizing theology. See Kwok, 144–45.

5. Pope Francis, "Greeting of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT)," §6.

of its affiliated groups. At numerous conferences under the umbrella of INSeCT, societies of Catholic theology such as the European Society of Catholic Theology (ESCT), the Catholic Theological Society of the Philippines (DaKaTeo), and Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) together with ESWTR worked on the same research topics. One of these collaborative research topics was the conference organized by ESCT in September 2015 in Leuven, Belgium on “The Name of God and the Question of Gender.” A second collaboration was the symposium on “Gender and Ecclesiology: An Intercultural Dialogue” at Tagaytay, Philippines, in July 2016, organized by DaKaTeo and ESCT. Additionally, the conference in Vienna, Austria, in September 2016 “The Role of Women in Decision Making in the Church and Society: A Question of Gender-Justice or Gender Ideology? Academic and Practical Challenges” was a joint project of ESCT and ESWTR in terms of content and organization. This continued with the conference in Manila/Philippines in 2019 on “Our Kairos — Common Challenges in Different Perspectives. Asian-European Dialogue” — a joint effort of DaKaTeo, EWA, ESCT, and ESWTR. The recent publication from INSeCT’s research programs testifies to a fruitful academic collaboration.⁶ This cooperation continued with the twin conference in 2023 in Manila and Leuven on “De/colonizing Theologies: Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges.” Aware of these nearly 10 years of INSeCT-ESWTR collaboration it seemed to be a foregone conclusion to publish the outcomes of this conference in the fairly new series *ESWTR Studies in Religion*, considering the series focuses — albeit not exclusively — on feminist and postcolonial issues.

2. Sites and sights of decolonizing theologies

Endeavors of decolonizing theology emerge in different locations, and each of these approaches is deeply shaped by the very concrete questions and specific histories that make up these contexts. While there are overlaps, they do not necessarily congeal into a cohesive, consensual approach. Instead, they come together with varying interests and in cacophonous voices. This is an experience we also made as an editorial team that is composed of members from Austria, Croatia, the Philippines, and Belgium. As we worked together on this volume, it was important to us not to smooth out the differences we encounter in our approaches to decolonial

6. Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel, Ruben Mendoza, and Gertraud Ladner, eds., *In Service for a Servant Church: Outlines and Challenges for Catholic Theology Today*, (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

theology, but to leave them visible as reminders of the powerful histories that shape each of our theologizing. This is why we include a section of autoethnographic vignettes in which each of us describes the unique path that brings us to the field of decolonial theologies.

2.1 *Gertraud Ladner: Of colonies and mountain villages*

In their article on gender and processes of decolonization,⁷ Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan describe the impact of colonization:

At the beginning of the 20th century, Europe ruled over 85% of the world's territory in the form of colonies, protectorates and dependencies. Colonial expansion was an exorbitant and violent process characterized by exploitation, enslavement and theft. [...] It does not take much intellectual effort to understand that such a massive territorial expansion, which was partly maintained by force for centuries, was not only possible through military presence, but also could not come to an end with the mere formal independence of the colonized states, and finally can hardly have left only traces in the colonized countries, but also shaped the global North.⁸

That colonization not only effected the global South, but also the global North, is confirmed by two stories in the history of my family. In the course of preparing for the conference, I was reminded of these stories. They show *that*, and to some extent also *how*, throughout a long period of (post)colonial time, the South and North were connected, and they exchanged knowledge and materials. This happened not only on institutional political levels and through trading companies, but also on personal levels. The narratives about far away countries in the South and their people were told by missionaries who informed their families and friends in Austrian mountain villages. These narratives of our relatives had an impact on my family's perspective of the world and informed them about the Philippines, the Congo and its people.

The first story brings us to a period after the "flourishing of missionary work"⁹ during the "mission century" in the early 20th century.¹⁰ In our family's photo album a black and white photograph shows several men sitting in front of a hut. A relatively young man with a bald head is sitting on the left side. My mother would point to him and say, "That's my

7. Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, "Gender und (De-)Kolonisierungsprozesse. Europa provinzialisieren? Ja, bitte! Aber wie?" *Femina Politica* 2 (2009): 9–18.

8. Castro Varela and Dhawan, 9.

9. Johannes Beckmann, "Missionsgeschichte," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (LTHK), 2nd edition, vol. 7 (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), c. 467.

10. Hans-Werner Gensichen, "Mission, Geschichte," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (RGG), 3rd edition, vol. 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1960), c. 987.

uncle... He was a missionary in the Philippines.” She told us that he died there soon after his arrival and was buried there too. And she still had a souvenir of his first Mass, a carving depicting a priest in front of the altar. A cousin then travelled to the Philippines and visited his grave. However, his photos were mixed up when they were developed and so there is no picture of it. Although there is hardly any knowledge about the activities of my mother’s uncle, it can be assumed that the family informed themselves about the missionary activities through various writings and journals of his monastic community.

The second story is situated after the Second Vatican Council in an atmosphere in which the awareness of being a part of a world church had increased. By that time, the majority of the colonies became independent. Sister Hedwig, one of my mother’s cousins, spent more than twenty years in Zaire, as it was then called, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Shortly after the Second Vatican Council she had been informed by a Catholic circle in Innsbruck that there was a need for missionary sisters in Africa. This appealed to her, as her uncle had also been a missionary. So she joined a missionary community who served in Zaire. She worked for some time in Kinshasa, then at a station near the Rwandan border, where she was responsible for growing food, cooking and training staff, and occasionally also for medical care for minor health problems. Once or twice a year, she wrote letters on thin airmail paper, which were then sent on to relatives and friends from her motherhouse in Munich. She rarely returned to Europe during this time, only every few years, mostly because of health problems. Then, with the civil war at the end of the 1990s, they had to leave their station because it was destroyed in the riots — she returned for good. During her rare family visits, she always brought with her some products — material history—from Congo.

“De/colonizing Theologies: Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges” threw me into the family history and left me somewhat perplexed, with things that could not be researched, and with discontinuities. However, the awareness of “transnational entanglements,”¹¹ global connectedness and glocal histories was sharpened by these family incidents. These entanglements extended geographically from small valleys and villages in Tyrol and Salzburg to remote places in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Philippines.

11. Linda Tatschiller and Karolin Wetjen, “Verflochtene Mission. Ansätze, Methoden und Fragestellungen einer neuen Missionsgeschichte,” in *Verflochtene Mission. Perspektiven auf eine neue Missionsgeschichte*, ed. Linda Tatschiller and Karolin Wetjen (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2018), 9–24. See also Rebekka Habermas and Richard Hölzl, eds., *Mission Global. Eine Verflechtungsgeschichte seit dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 159–175.

2.2 *Judith Gruber: Decolonizing theologies in Western Europe*

How can we do decolonizing theologies as White people in and from Western Europe? Two central insights from post- and decolonial studies can help us navigate towards a response. First, a crucial point that post-colonial scholars take from their critical research is the admonition to be suspicious of master narratives that subject the messiness of reality to linear trajectories and erase problematic experiences and unwelcome voices for the sake of a story of triumph. What has been true for the dominant account of colonial history, must also be paid heed to in understanding decolonization: there is not one story, one experience or one practice of decolonization. Rather, depending on one's position, decolonization will take on different forms. In the 21st century, we are indeed all postcolonial subjects. Yet, bearing a moral injury in the wake of colonial history, the task of decolonization for White people on *this* side of the colonial divide differs significantly from the decolonization needs, resources and practices of formerly colonized communities. A second important insight from the field of postcolonial studies can then help to delineate what exactly the specific task is of decolonization for the White postcolonial subject in Western Europe. As scholars of Critical Whiteness Studies have highlighted, a crucial component of White privilege is its invisibility to those who can avail themselves of it. Not only does colonial discourse create social hierarchies that distribute vulnerability to exploitation and access to resources asymmetrically along gendered, racialized and religionized ways. It also includes strategies that grant the hegemonic group blissful innocence—which really is a violent ignorance—about the underlying power structures that sustain its privileged position. Research has shown how Christian theology has been instrumental in constructing a powerful innocence that opens a path for the powerful to identify with/ as victims and leaves them unequipped to account for and constructively deal with the power they exercise.

There is—of course—a temptation for the White postcolonial subject to join the bandwagon of decolonization as a project of overcoming a history of colonization whose memory has now become partly discom-forting, and whose remnants haunt and besiege its well-protected status. Yet, in view of the violent innocence that coloniality has granted us so far, our task in the project of decolonization is not so much to overcome history, but first and foremost to place ourselves rightly in it. This requires a reversal of the colonial gaze. Decolonization may often be framed as a project of inclusion that gives voice to those who have hitherto been excluded. This strategy, however, does not unsettle the power structures

that have been consolidated throughout colonial history, but in fact solidifies them. Instead, what is required of us is a critical, self-reflexive exposure of the powerful discourses that have granted us privilege, and that sustain our hegemonic position in the enduring history of coloniality. Decolonization, for us, must first and foremost be a dismantling of the self-evidence with which we lay a claim to epistemic power and material privilege. (Only) by rewriting history in this self-critical way can we show that another world is possible, can we contribute to opening spaces for transformation. Given the political-theological constitution of coloniality, this rewriting of history must also include our practice of theology—there is a need to reckon with the irresolvable entanglements of Christian God-talk into colonial history, without all too quickly laying a claim to its original or ultimate innocence, in ways that would reiterate the political theology of coloniality.

2.3 *Neven Vukic: An outsider's perspective*

From the perspective of a theologian who is not native to the field (as I am), postcolonial theology encompasses more than just a particular way of doing theology. In my view, postcolonial theology can be seen simultaneously as a vocation, an expectation, and perhaps even a form of colonial exploitation.

Let us begin with postcolonial theology as a vocation, as it is arguably the easiest of the three to justify. Those who engage in it do so with an awareness of the risks associated with this relatively uncommon approach, especially given the recent reactionary backlash against newer theological developments. In other words, if a vocation is understood as a natural inclination toward an activity, distinct from a profession motivated by financial or other material gains, it is clear that in the reactionary climate of the past few decades, there are easier paths to advance as a theologian than specializing in postcolonial theology.

Postcolonial theology as an expectation presents certain challenges, particularly when we consider the prefix “post” in “postcolonialism.” It is perhaps useful to revisit the definition of colonialism at this point. A more recent and comprehensive definition describes colonialism as the systematic restriction of autonomy for a (proto) national group by a distinct (proto) nation-state, where the identities of both groups are shaped not by objective traits but by subjective self-identification.¹² Given the socioeconomic realities of the 21st century, can we genuinely assert that

12. Patrick Colm Hogan, *What is Colonialism?* (London: Routledge, 2024), 40.

colonialism has ended? If not, can we truly speak of a “post-”colonial context in any meaningful way, including in theology? According to recent scholars, the answer is no. At best, we can acknowledge a post-independence period in former colonies.¹³ Consequently, what post-colonial theologians are often doing is speculating on what a postcolonial theology might be, or rather, anticipating how it could or should look in a genuinely post-colonial context, while simultaneously working towards and expecting that context to fully materialize.

So far, so good. But what about the claim that postcolonial theology could be in fact a type of colonial exploitation? What if, in advocating for a specific approach to theology—even (or especially) those with the most “noble” intention—as normative, we are, in effect, engaging in a form of colonialism ourselves? This concern arises when one insists that adopting the core precepts of postcolonial theory across the field of theology is both factually and ethically necessary. In doing so, are we not imposing a particular framework on others, thereby replicating the very dynamics of control and dominance that postcolonialism seeks to challenge?

To put it differently, why should a theologian from Oceania be expected to work exclusively within their own context? In effect, local theologians are encouraged to “unearth” the riches of their own theological contexts, only for these intellectual resources to be gathered and disseminated—via open access, of course, i.e., for free—through predominantly Western academic channels. There is a word used to describe the practice of “encouraging” local populations to unearth the riches of their own lands for the enrichment of people and groups abroad—exploitation.

On the other hand, should a theologian from Syria be discouraged from pursuing an academic research career focused on Thomas Aquinas or Karl Barth because that is not their cultural context? Overall, such expectations risk limiting intellectual freedom and could perpetuate a new form of constraint under the guise of postcolonial theory.

Furthermore, when we praise a particular type of theologian as exemplary of what a postcolonial theologian is “expected to be,” are we not, in fact, reinforcing our own stereotypes, while implicitly rehabilitating a type of orientalism and restoring the idea of the “noble savage,” and even seem to reward and advocate for social mimicry and conformism.¹⁴

13. Alessandro Orsini, *Sociological Theory: From Comte to Postcolonialism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 642–643.

14. Werner Kahl, “Postcolonial Biblical Hermeneutics and Exegesis,” in *Postcolonial Biblical Hermeneutics: International Perspectives*, ed. Werner Kahl (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2024), 107–109; Monika Albrecht, “Critical Post-Colonial Studies: Opening Up the

What would a postcolonial theology entail (from an outsider's perspective)? Without delving into a broader discussion, for which there is neither the space nor time here, we might begin with the oft-cited phrase from Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). In other words, a truly postcolonial theology is simply theology—or what I would argue what theology should be. It is a way of thinking, anarchic in nature, where issues like the periphery-center dynamic, power imbalances, and other distortions of human relations are not merely problematized or deconstructed, but rather negated and entirely transcended.¹⁵

2.4 *Rachel Sanchez: Decolonial and postcolonial theologies from a Filipina perspective*

Decolonial and postcolonial approaches in theology come from two streams of influences which stem from different geographical roots. On the one hand, decolonial approaches bear the influences of South American diasporic thinkers who interrogate colonial discourses, such as Anibal Quijano, Walter D.M.ignolo, and Maria Lugones. On the other hand, postcolonial thinkers like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who are also scholars in diaspora, bring in perspectives from the Middle East and Asia, as they deconstruct Eurocentric ideas from the Middle East.¹⁶ As a Filipina, who finds herself in a nation that locates itself as part of Asia while also finding cultural similarities with Latin America because of Spanish colonization and Catholic mission, the origins and particularities of both approaches find resonance in the way we can do theology in the Philippines. Moreover, despite their differences, both strands challenge the Eurocentric modernity promulgated and imposed through colonialism, and reinforced by religion. Both approaches also encourage various perspectives that would otherwise be suppressed, silenced, or marginalized if dominant discourses remain unquestioned.¹⁷ Aside from Spanish colonization, the Philippines also bears the ongoing effects of Japanese occupation and American colonization. American influence on Philippine politics, economics, and culture continues to be present avenues for interrogation.

Post-Colonial to a Broader Geopolitical View," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias* (31 August 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1283>.

15. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 210–212.

16. Gurminder K. Bhambra, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues," *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2014.966414>.

17. Bhambra, 115, 120.

Decolonial and postcolonial approaches deal with the aftermath of colonization and its on-going influences, as well as its recurrence in new forms, such as in neocolonialism, rather than seek an erasure of past events as if we can move on as though the “past never happened.” These approaches are premised precisely on the acknowledgement that historical events, as painful and violent as they may be, have in fact taken place and we now have to deal with their messy effects and forms today.¹⁸

These approaches are means of engaging and contending with colonial and neocolonial realities regarding the way they define modernity, reinforce hegemony and imperialism, and involve religion.¹⁹ They entail challenging and examining the complicity of theology in hegemonic discourse and articulating creative and prophetic alternatives.²⁰ It is an invitation to be surprised by God’s spirit moving in various ways.²¹ These decolonial and postcolonial concerns invite a variety of ways of reflecting on faith, such as Indigenous and popular theologies, queer and feminist theologies, multicultural and intercultural theologies, liberationist theologies and other contextual theologies.²² Listening to various perspectives also entails a sensitivity to the politics of domination at play if we want theological conversations to be dialogical and efforts towards solidarity to be just.²³ This, however, does not entail a rejection of anything that is “Western.” Decolonial and postcolonial theories cultivated by diasporic scholars have also benefited from the insights and influences of European and American academic training. Christianity which came to the Philippines as part of a missionary and colonial project has also been seen by Filipinos as a source of resistance against colonialism.²⁴

18. See Loomba, *Colonialism-Postcolonialism*, 12; Daniel Franklin Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory: Appropriations in Contemporary Theology,” *Asian Christian Review* 1, no. 1 (2007): 20.

19. Peter Mayo, “Gramsci, Education and Power,” in *Power and Education*, ed. Antonia Kupfer, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 45, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137415356_4; Musa Dube, “Reading for Decolonization: John 4:1–42,” in *Semeia 75: Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, ed. Laura Donaldson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1996): 38–45; Stefan Silber, *Postcolonial Theologies* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024), especially chapt. 1, <https://wipfandstock.com/9798385205424/postcolonial-theologies/>.

20. Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory,” 28.

21. Ruben Mendoza, “The Ray of Truth That Enlightens All: Nostra Aetate and Its Reception by the FABC,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 16, no. 2 (2006): 150.

22. Pilario, “Mapping Postcolonial Theory,” 21.

23. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 39–44, 60, 202–203.

24. Lisa Asedillo, “The Theology of Struggle: Critiques of Church and Society in the Philippines (1970s-1990s),” *Indonesian Journal of Theology* 9, no. 1 (2021): 63–89, <https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v9i1.187>.

While sensitive to the complexity of decolonial and postcolonial theologies, theologians are also constantly challenged to attend to the practical dimensions of theologizing.²⁵ A *paralysis of analysis* can inhibit the change both theologies would want to foster in the first place, and thus serve the *status quo* wherein the dominant voices remain.²⁶

Theologians from regions that have engaged in colonialism and regions that have been colonized are therefore enjoined to work together with colleagues from other disciplines intending to change minds, practices, and structures, towards a more just and inclusive ecological society. Nevertheless, while both former and present colonizers and colonized need decolonial and postcolonial theologizing,²⁷ voices that have been silenced or disadvantaged because of our shared colonial histories need to be given partial epistemological privilege²⁸ if we are all to imagine our world and our futures anew. We cannot liberate ourselves from old systems and mindsets if the same dominant perspectives continue to prevail even in new discourses. As Lilla Watson, in quoting an Aboriginal woman has said, “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

2.5 *Ruben C. Mendoza: The theological task in the Asian context*

Growing up in predominantly Catholic Philippines, I took pride with the claim that my country is the only “Catholic nation” in Asia. (Timor Leste was still under the authority of Indonesia at that time.) I took it for granted that the Catholic faith was the “true” faith and by implication, other religious traditions were “false.” I lived in a community in which one can safely assume that one’s neighbors shared the same faith. My exposure to peoples of other religious traditions was almost nil. In high school, I only had one Muslim batchmate and at that time, I shared the prejudices of Filipino Christians against Muslims.

It was only when I lived in Cotabato City in southern Philippines, a place that historically was a seat of Muslim power in pre-colonial times,

25. Daniel Franklin Pilario, “The Craft of Contextual Theology: Towards a Conversation on Theological Method in the Philippine Context,” *Hapag A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 1, no. 1 (2004): 39.

26. Manuel Tejido and Jaime Acevedo, “Ang Sirkulong Pastoral Sa Pagtuturo Ng TH 141,” in *Readings for Theology 141: A Theology of the Catholic Social Vision*, ed. Pasquale T. Giordano (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2007), 89.

27. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 127.

28. Agnes M. Brazal, “Feminist Ideology Criticisms, the Bible and the Community,” *MST Review* 2, no. 2 (1999): 113–14.

that I began to realize that the world was way bigger than the Christian one and that I began to appreciate traditions other than my own. Later, as I continued with my theological education, I began to problematize the Christian claim, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, and recognized the limitations of Christian theological assertions in coming to a better understanding of and harmonious relations with peoples of other faiths. It seems to me that Christian claims have been used by colonial powers in subjugating and/or pacifying local peoples by labeling them as pagans or heathens and by threatening them that their salvation was dependent on their conversion to the Christian faith and compliance with the colonizers.

As my world grew with my travels to countries in which Christians are the minority, I have come to appreciate the claim of many Christians in other parts of Asia that while the church is *in* Asia, it is sadly not really a Church of Asia—a church that is not local but foreign, a vestige of Western colonizers who came to control them and exploit their natural resources. “As a social institution the church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. The lingering colonial image survives in its traditional ecclesiastical structures and economic dependence on the West. The church is even sometimes seen as an obstacle or threat to national integration and to religious and cultural identity.... The church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structures, in its worship, in its Western-trained leadership and in its theology”²⁹. The challenge thus remains for the Asian churches to be truly Asian in its flavor, “an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life”³⁰. Much work remains to be done in this regard.

It is no wonder then that for the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), the primary mode of evangelization is dialogue – dialogue with the poor, dialogue with cultures and dialogue with religions. In a sense, the FABC is a forerunner of Pope Francis’ thrust on synodality. After all, to be a dialogical church is to be a church that listens and responds to the needs of people. It will not be surprising that in this dialogue, various theological-pastoral concerns will emerge, different from the ones who are in the center.

29. FABC Office of Evangelization, “Conclusions of the Theological Consultation”, in *For All the Peoples of Asia. Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. Documents from 1970-1991*, vol. 1, ed. Catalino Arevalo and Gaudencio Rosales (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 337.

30. “FABC Papers 093: A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service. The Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly, Samphran, Thailand, January 2000 – FABC,” 2000, 9; <https://fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-093/>.

To do theology then in the Asian context demands that the church be responsive to the questions and concerns of Asians, particularly those who are in the margins. The subject or content of theology in this endeavor will not be pre-determined or dictated by so-called scholars or even by religious leaders but will be fruits of one's encounter with people on the ground. It might also happen that in the process of engaging them in dialogue, their understandings of and questions about the faith will challenge one's interpretation of God's word in the here and now and lead one to a deeper encounter with that same word.

Theology is supposed to be at the service of life and not merely an intellectual exercise in which one comes to a better understanding and interpretation of the Christian faith. Such a theology would necessitate the questioning of theological claims and perspectives that have been instrumentalized to promote Western hegemony. That would mean being sensitive to elements of the Christian tradition that have been used to perpetuate and legitimize an oppressive and unjust *status quo*. That would even require emphasizing elements of the faith that are truly relevant and liberative in one's context without any claim to comprehensiveness.

For too long, the doing of theology has emphasized the intellectual dimension of the faith and the unquestioning acceptance of (Western) theology's provenance, assumptions and perspectives. A decolonial project serves to not only question that kind of theologizing but also to craft theologies that promote people's well-being and empower them to work for God's Kingdom. Much remains to be done in this regard.

3. Structure of the volume

Each in their own way, the contributors to this volume continue these multifaceted and multi-voiced explorations, with each of them, too, speaking from a particular site, engaging with a distinct history, and consequently developing unique insights. While some highlight more strongly the "casuality" of their contribution (i.e. they mark themselves more clearly as case studies of particular contexts of de/colonization), others engage more explicitly in theoretical reflections. However, both aspects—practice and theory, particularity and generalization—are at work in each of these chapters. There is a fluid boundary between doing de/colonial theology and methodological/epistemological reflections about these practices. Theory cannot but emerge from a particular site and is constitutively informed by the practices that give shape to it. In turn, a particular theological practice already implies distinct methodological choices and epistemological presuppositions.

When we arrange the contributions to this volume into a two-part structure (Part 1 entitled “Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges,” and Part 2 under the heading of “Theoretical Reflections”), we have the fluidity between theory and practice very much in mind, and by no means want to insinuate that a clear distinction between them is possible. However, we found it helpful to divide the contributions into those which study the entanglements of theological and colonial practices more explicitly in particular histories and contexts, and those which undertake more directly methodological explorations of how to study de/colonizing theologies, outline the epistemological implications for understanding knowledge and engage in constructive reflections about possible theological reconfigurations in view of coloniality. With the structure of the book, we do not intend to impose a hierarchy of any way onto the chapters—and still, in the overall arrangement of the contributions, we wanted to honor an insight that comes to the fore throughout: decolonizing theology is a local practice that pays heed to the “petite histoires” underneath any given master narrative, never easily synthesized into one position or unified view.

We will conclude our introduction with a summaries of contributions:

In her contribution *From Colonial Aftermath to a Postcolonial Future Insights from Ecolonial-Sustainability Biblical Theology and Pedagogy* Ma. Maricel S. Ibita analyzes our contemporary ecological crisis as a consequence of colonization. She addresses the religious conceptualization of the creator-creation dynamic as the not so apparent cause of this crisis and strives to develop a transdisciplinary theological response. After outlining socioeconomic, political, and religious worldviews that shaped colonization policies and influenced environmental exploitation, she investigates *Laudato Si'* and recent documents of the Philippine ordinary and presents advances from contemporary biblical ecological hermeneutics. Genesis 1 then serves as a test case for new understandings of creator-creation relations toward theologizing and teaching which responds to the environmental crisis.

Ignace Ndongala Maduku in *Transitional Faces of the Church of Kinshasa. The Decolonization of Ecclesial Structures in the Democratic Republic of Congo* shows how the policies of Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula from Kinshasa changed the internal attitude and structure of the church in Kongo and moved it away from the approach and mission inherited from colonization. Malula developed an ecclesial, pastoral, and socio-political project for an Africanization of the church conceptualizing church as a family supported by fraternity. Ndongala Maduku describes the inculturation

of the liturgy and the reorganization of the commitment of lay and clergy, including the emancipation of women in the church. In conclusion, Ngondala evaluates the current directions in the Congolese church on the basis of the possibilities achieved under Malula.

In his article *Political Theology and Theocratic Rule in the Spanish Conquest and Colonization of the Philippines* John D. Blanco discusses how articles by Gayo y Aragón and Phelan—giving distinct views on the arguments during the time of the Spanish colonization—have an important function for diagnosing the impact of colonial legacies in the post-colonial Philippines. Blanco shows that the debate about the “spiritual conquest” of the Philippines in the time of decolonization after World War II especially contributed to the role of the Catholic Church in the narrative to the country’s path to nationhood. Henceforth he questions if there could be a truly postcolonial or decolonial theology when it does not examine the inseparable fusion and complicity of Christianity with the act of conquest and colonial rule and the atrocities legitimized by them.

The article *Towards an Ecclesial Decolonization of Theology/Canon Law: Perspective from a Female African Canon Lawyer* by Mary Jane Aririguzo advances some ways in which an African female Canon lawyer’s perspectives challenge the reigning discourse of theology and Canon law for the sake of decolonization. It sets out some key aspects of the postcolonial critique of theology and shows how conceptions of “Canon law” in the discipline ought to shift from predominant Western paradigms. However, it also challenges any reified distinction of “theology” and “Canon law.” It is argued that if theology and Canon law from an African perspective is to fulfil its potential it must operate within decolonization and inculturation frames. It suggests that a hermeneutical basis for decolonization of theology and by extension Canon law may be rethought through inculturation lenses.

John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer in their article *Palestinian Liberation Theology and the Holy Fire* introduce Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) as a dynamic and complex process of challenging colonial systems and values, while operating within colonial systems and value structures. Writing this theology during one of the most brutal wars in the Near East, both authors see the production of knowledge for Palestinian theologians in a vital position which should avoid the danger of reenforcing and supporting oppressive colonial norms. The article seeks to build and continue the process of decolonizing PLT by using Palestinian Indigenous methods and sources. This is done by drawing on the Indigenous Palestinian tradition and practice of the Holy Fire ceremony at Easter known as

Sabt al-Nour which contains themes of liberation, justice, and indigeneity. By this the authors want to offer a message of resilience and hope to those suffering.

In his contribution *Comparative Theological Entanglements from the Old World to the New World: Toward a Catholic-Muslim Decolonial Theology* Axel Marc Oaks Takacs starts with the statement, that comparative theology often remains entangled in colonial legacies, hegemonic identity politics, and a World Religions Paradigm that continues to essentialize religions. He then examines how the Christian imperial and colonial legacy of race—especially racial imaginaries of the Muslim and Jew in Europe—were extended to the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and affected the colonization of the Americas. Takacs emphasizes that perceiving the rich post-classical Islam intellectual and spiritual traditions—e.g. Sufism—as well as the lived religion and reality of Muslims in a neoliberal, neocolonial, and capitalist world is a part of the way to decolonize comparative theology with Islam and by this support the struggle of subaltern communities towards social justice, decolonial liberation, and global solidarity worldwide.

In Gunda Werner's article *Antifeminism and Gender Ideology—A Genealogy on an Important Piece of Roman Catholic Anthropology* she analyses how Catholic magisterial thinking about gender and colonial thinking reinforce(d) each other. Werner specifically highlights the developments of the 19th century where religion shifted into the private sphere and thus was feminized. This caused attitudes aimed at securing religious masculinities, just as in colonial contexts the superiority and masculinity of the colonizers had to be secured. The article shows that a decolonizing theology cannot go without an extensive gender analysis.

There are certainly many more global and local histories to discuss and contemporary challenges to elaborate on. Nevertheless, the next articles use a more theoretical approach and reflect on the methodologies of a colonizing and decolonizing theology.

In his article *Decolonizing Theology: Pathways Towards Liberative Transformations* Stefan Silber points out that in the past, Christianity often served to legitimize and expand colonial rule. If in the present it intends to be used as a tool for decolonial liberation, it will need to transform itself (and be transformed) in profound and often painful ways. Emerging decolonial theologies around the world can serve as an example and proof that this transformation is possible. To decolonize European theologies, it will be necessary to detect and deconstruct the coloniality of its discourses, concepts and epistemologies as well as its power structures and practices. It is necessary to pay attention to the attitudes and

acts of resistance that theology encounters and is able to enact. Silber stresses, that in addition, theology must learn from alternatives that are produced in all parts of the world so that it can sincerely contribute to the decolonial liberation carried out by the previously colonized peoples.

In *Undoing Theological Limbos and Re-signifying Genealogies. The Unfinished Project of the Colonial Locus Theologicus*, Montserrat Escribano Cárcel describes the Spanish theology as in a state of *limbo*—a state of academic omission shared with other disciplines with respect to colonial history; it still has to look after the origins and understandings that generated the Spanish imperial colonial thought. Integrating the rejection of the so-called “Doctrine of Discovery” Escribano Cárcel proposes to run the risk of developing a “third day theology,” a theology that acknowledges all the colonial memories that have been overlooked, and exercise theological responsibility in order to create a liberating decolonial theology for the present.

Edith Wittenbrink in her contribution to this anthology: *Unlearning Our Privileges (as White Theologians) as Our Loss? Decolonial Challenges in the Field of Christian Social Ethics* focuses on central topics that theological ethics faces in Germany. As a starting point she uses the concept of unlearning the ‘White privilege’ to show how it can help to create critical knowledge on injustices in the society and the church regarding marginalized persons and positions. The article suggests that especially within theological ethics decolonial criticism can foster a self-examination in context of the current migration society and a Christian ethical approach that searches for shared normative convictions in an inclusive discourse.

An ongoing research project, led by Judith Gruber and Idesbald Goddeeris, is presented in the next contribution to this publication by Mick Feyaerts, Idesbald Goddeeris, Judith Gruber, Georges Nembunzu Mizingi, and Simon Nsielanga Tukumu: *The Decolonization of the Church in Congo/Zaire/the DRC—A Multidisciplinary Approach*. After an overview of literature on the decolonization of the church with a particular focus on Belgium and Congo, three different approaches on the research of the decolonization of the church are presented. Georges Nembunzu Mizingi deals with the struggle against the discrimination of Africans in the production of knowledge by studying the Africanization project of Cardinal Joseph Malula. Then Simon Nsielanga Tukumu highlights the institutional and economic dimensions of decolonization in an analysis of the Society of Jesus in Congo. Last but not least Mick Feyaerts reflects on the aspect of gender by studying how decolonization affected the practices, rituals, and materialities of sister congregations in one particular Congolese city.

Finally in their collective writing project *Mimicry-Decoloniality. The Performative Self-contradiction in Decolonizing Theologies* Rica Anceta, Maike Domsel, Judith Gruber, Christian Kern, and Sigrid Rettenbacher respond to unsettling insights that emerged from encounters, conversations, and conflicts at the conference on “De/colonizing Theologies: Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges,” held in 2023 in Manila and Leuven. They—once again—pose critical questions to decolonizing theology as a whole with the question that became the center of the reflections: is there a performative self-contradiction at work in our efforts to decolonize theology? By writing down their individual approaches, the authors illustrate their research contexts and reflect on which privileges, mechanisms and processes determine, prevent, jeopardize and promote decolonial and postcolonial theologies.

PART 1

**GLOCAL HISTORIES,
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES**

CHAPTER 1

FROM COLONIAL AFTERMATH TO A POSTCOLONIAL FUTURE: INSIGHTS FROM ECOLONIAL-SUSTAINABILITY, BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND PEDAGOGY

Ma. Maricel S. Ibita

Introduction

The theme of the International Network of Societies for Catholic Theology (INSeCT) for the 2023 twin conference at KU Leuven, Belgium and the Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines is aptly titled “Decolonizing Theologies: Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges.”¹ In analyzing our contemporary ecological crisis as one of the major consequences of colonization and in the hope of changing our habitus towards the planet, the people, and fellow created beings, I echo the challenge of Lynn White that we need to address one of the not-so-obvious but implicit causes of our ecological crisis, viz., religion as our way of conceptualizing creator-creation relationship.² I propose that a more deliberate, systematic way of theologizing and teaching that underlines the aftermath of colonization and furthers the task of decolonizing our way of understanding creator-creation dynamic is where our contributions to and from various fields of theology can be useful for a transdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder response to the ecological emergency. What we need is a dynamic of transformational ecological theology and pedagogy to effect intellectual, moral, and behavioral ecological conversion that underlines the *unique relations between AND among the divine, humans AND non-humans*. In this contribution, I will first briefly note how socioeconomic, political, and religious

1. I would like to give thanks to the organizers and participants of INSeCT 2023 for their valuable comments, insights, and questions. I also extend my thanksgiving to the Maurits Sabbe Library of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven for some of the materials I used in this investigation. Finally, I am grateful to the Ateneo de Manila University’s Research and Creative Work Grant for 2022–2023 for supporting me and giving me time to do my research for the project entitled *Shalom: Learning, Teaching and Living Sustainability Theology* (RACW (FG4182022)).

2. Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1206, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.

worldviews shaped colonization policies and influenced environmental exploitation. Next, in dialogue with *Laudato Si* and some of the most important responses of the local ordinary, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, I will succinctly present some advances from contemporary biblical ecological hermeneutics. Finally, the well-known text of Genesis 1 will serve as a test case in this ecological theologizing and teaching for a more sustainable and inclusive future for our planet, globally and locally, in this postCOVID-19-pandemic era. The use of "postCOVID-19" term is not only temporal, i.e., during the time of the height of the pandemic in 2020 but also includes the other and later effects of the global health emergency to various systems (political, economic, environmental, socio-cultural, psycho-spiritual) of communal-societal living.

1. Colonization, convictions, and institutions

While the voyage of Columbus is more popularly known to be a quest for profit through the spice trade, it was also impelled by his millenarian beliefs and dreams of reconquering the Holy Land from the Moors and evangelizing the newly-discovered lands.³ Columbus expressed these thoughts in his *Diario* where he wrote about the ease of converting the natives if only the royals would send missionaries who will learn their language and teach them.⁴ Amidst reports that the Hispaniola colony was in disarray and to restore his honor before the Catholic Monarchs,⁵ Columbus dedicated to them his *Libro de las profecías* which is a collection of his millenarian interpretation of biblical verses and ideas from ancient authors, church fathers, medieval authors, the Quran, and Islamic writers.⁶ While he recognized his own knowledge in astronomy, astrology, geography, arithmetic, and map reading, he also underlined that the Holy Spirit who inspires his interpretation of the Scriptures was the one who sets him on fire to finish the journey and hasten to Jerusalem.⁷ Columbus' *Lettera Rarissima*, addressed to the sovereigns from Jamaica, even seems to infer that his search for gold was meant to fund his Jerusalem plans.⁸

3. See Carol Delaney, *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem: How Religion Drove the Voyages That Led to America* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2012); Delno C. West, "Christopher Columbus and His Enterprise to the Indies: Scholarship of the Last Quarter Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1992): 266.

4. Carol Delaney, "Columbus's Ultimate Goal: Jerusalem," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48, no. 2 (2006): 265, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417506000119>.

5. *Ibid.*, 267.

6. *Ibid.*, 266, 268.

7. *Ibid.*, 272.

8. *Ibid.*, 270.

Carol Delaney highlights the importance of recognizing how prevailing religious worldviews affects one's perception of social life and how cosmic order influences human experience as seen in this spiritual facet of Columbus' navigations or what Delno West calls "geoeschatology."⁹ This idea relates well with Lynn White's bifocal description of the Christian faith, viz., history ("coherent account of events which occurred in time") and myth ("the dramatization in temporal terms of things seen from the non-temporal standpoint of eternity").¹⁰

One may also wonder how traces of this interlacing socioeconomic, political, and religious worldviews influenced Ferdinand Magellan's commissioned expedition as the maritime rivalry between Spain and Portugal heightened.¹¹ If at first the Spanish emperor Charles V only wanted to find a shorter route to the Spice Island (Moluccas),¹² the circumnavigation of the world under Magellan's, and later under Juan Sebastián Elcano's, direction also "push[ed] the boundaries of geographical mapping,"¹³ the discovery and naming of the largest body of water in the world, the Pacific Ocean, which was previously known as South Sea,¹⁴ and the discovery of the strait (later named after Magellan) that many naval captains after Columbus looked for and which resulted in a more accurate geographical measurement of the earth from the time of Ptolemy and contemporary European map-making.¹⁵ These achievements for Spain did not only mean cartographical power for the empire,¹⁶ they were also "cosmographic and cosmological."¹⁷ The new discoveries physically, geographically, and metaphysically challenged the contemporary understanding of the *mappa mundi* produced by Fra Mauro in Venice 60 years earlier which shows that the known continents were bordered by forsaken islands and an immense expanse of impenetrable darkness that restricted human

9. *Ibid.*, 277, 280; Delno C. West, "Christopher Columbus, Lost Biblical Sites, and the Last Crusade," *The Catholic Historical Review* 78, no. 4 (1992): 520.

10. Lynn White, "Christian Myth and Christian History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 2 (1942): 146, 148, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707174>; Delaney, "Columbus's Ultimate Goals," 286.

11. See Andrea Ballesteros Danel, "Ideas about Trans-Pacific Origins and Voyages in Early Spanish Chronicles from the Americas," *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 27, no. 1 (2021): 69–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13260219.2021.1954368>.

12. Matteo Salonia, "Encompassing the Earth: Magellan's Voyage from Its Political Context to Its Expansion of Knowledge," *International Journal of Maritime History* 34, no. 4 (2022): 550, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08438714221123468>.

13. *Ibid.*, 552.

14. *Ibid.*, 553.

15. *Ibid.*, 554.

16. Ruth Sanchez Imizcoz, "... and the World was round: The Magellan-Elcano Adventure. The First Circumnavigation of the World," *South Atlantic Review* 82, no. 2 (2017): 5.

17. Salonia, "Encompassing the Earth," 554.

mobility.¹⁸ Finally, Antonio Pigafetta's *Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo* offered a rigorous interpretative chronicling of the eventful Magellan-Elcano voyage and the places they reached with its peoples, *flora*, *fauna*, and marine life which widened European ethnographic, anthropological, and linguistic knowledge and interest on Asia.¹⁹

From this sixteenth century worldviews and the comparable influences of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century,²⁰ the maritime explorations and subsequent colonization by Spain hindered the sociocultural, economic, political and religious domains of its colonies.²¹ Thus, a second look at the various places that the colonial powers "discovered" and their Indigenous demography and sociopolitical organizations may lead to a rewriting of sociocultural and historical processes.²² A critical evaluation of colonialism could reveal how it systematically introduced and perpetuated social stratification and income inequality,²³ brought in the evolution of some diseases,²⁴ and promoted imperial economic botany in food production and medicine which highlights human intervention in manipulating nature to bring about ecological and environmental changes.²⁵ Through time, colonialism's effects on the environment in terms of geography, climate, soil condition, botanical properties of potentially useful

18. *Ibid.*, 554.

19. *Ibid.*, 557. See also Joan-Pau Rubiés, "The Spanish Contribution to the Ethnology of Asia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Renaissance Studies* 17, no. 3 (2003): 418–448.

20. María Cruz Berrocal and Christophe Sand, "A Question of Impact: Did We Underestimate the Consequences of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries Period of Early European Exploration in the Pacific?," *The Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* 16, no. 2–4 (2021): 243–244, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564894.2019.1679292>.

21. See Matthew Lange, James Mahoney, and Matthias vom Hau, "Colonialism and Development: A Comparative Analysis of Spanish and British Colonies," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1412–1462, <https://doi.org/10.1086/499510>.

22. Cruz Berrocal and Sand, "Question," 233.

23. Yves Boquet, "The Spanish Creation of the Philippines: The Birth of a Nation," in *The Philippine Archipelago*, by Yves Boquet (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 68–70, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-51926-5_4; Wonik Kim, "Rethinking Colonialism and the Origins of the Developmental State in East Asia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39, no. 3 (2009): 382–399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472330902944446>.

24. Timothy D.V. Dye et al., "Critical Medical Ecological Perspectives on Diabetes in the Pacific Islands: Colonialism, Power, and Balance in Human-Environment Interaction Over Time," *Lancet*, CUGH 9th Annual Conference, 6 (2018): 36, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(18\)30165-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(18)30165-7); Nyang'ori Ohenjo et al., "Health of Indigenous People in Africa," *Lancet* 367, no. 9526 (2006): 1937–1946, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(06\)68849-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(06)68849-1).

25. Paula De Vos, "The Science of Spices: Empiricism and Economic Botany in the Early Spanish Empire," *Journal of World History* 17, no. 4 (2006): 407, 410. See also Raymond L. Bryant, "Political Ecology: An Emerging Research Agenda in Third-World Studies," *Political Geography* 11, no. 1 (1992): 12–36, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298\(92\)90017-N](https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(92)90017-N).

(or harmful) plants have also contributed to or hindered a nation's development and environmental sustainability.²⁶ For Whitney Baumann,

[T]he science of ecology, words about the house, find its genealogy in the era of European colonization. In fact, it began as an effort to classify the flora and fauna that Europeans came into contact with (and claimed to 'discover' in some cases) through the process of colonization. These new 'discoveries' were not only of mere aesthetic curiosity for European colonizers, but also of economic interest.²⁷

As such, Libby Robin reasonably labels "ecology" as a "science of empire."²⁸

This exploitative situation is not limited to the Iberian empires' maritime conquests. Ruel Pagunsan's careful study of the American colonization of the Philippines after Spain at the dawn of the twentieth century shows how the United States perpetuated the economics of natural resources through various institutions designed to shape the nation.²⁹ Nature-making or "[T]he discovery, cataloguing and codifying of Philippine landscapes and species served as the foundational mechanisms in which to articulate the country's biological geography as a unitary body.³⁰ Cartography, census, museums, and scientific institutions as technologies of rule facilitated nature-making and nation-building.³¹ Natural history is considered in the nineteenth century as

'big science' because of its role in shaping imperial ambitions for control of territory and nature. As a science, natural history bestowed concepts and categories to transform 'unknown' and 'complex' environments into mapped and classified entities, and provided pertinent frameworks in which to extract the relevance and usefulness of nature. In particular, the Linnaean system of standardized classification facilitated the annexation of species from all parts of the globe to the Western scientific 'code.'³²

Pagunsan explains that with this development in colonial history, gardens, museum, academies, and universities provided venues and avenues for nature-making through scientific naming and classification, descriptive

26. De Vos, "Science," 427; Libby Robin, "Ecology: A Science of Empire?" in *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*, ed. Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), 63–75.

27. Whitney Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 57–58.

28. Robin, "Ecology," 63.

29. Ruel Vacio Pagunsan, "Colonizing the Philippine Environment: Natural History, Science and the Nation," (Dissertation, Singapore, Department of History, National University of Singapore, 2017), <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/bitstream/10635/136159/1/PagunsanRV.pdf>.

30. Ruel V. Pagunsan, "Nature, Colonial Science and Nation-Building in Twentieth-Century Philippines," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2020): 563, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463420000703>.

31. *Ibid.*, 563–564.

32. *Ibid.*, 564.

analysis, laboratory experimentation, and topics for discussion in conferences and specialized publications administered by the same colonial institutions in the West and in their colonies for fortune and for fame.³³ Through these institutions, America changed their colonization strategy into “Filipinization,”³⁴ from the military and militant form against Spain and the United States into a more rational, civic and cultural form hereafter through the keepers and shapers of national identity like the National Library, National Archives, National Museum, state universities, and the like.³⁵

Reynaldo Raluto underlines the ecological dimension of the Filipinos’ colonial oppression.³⁶ Against the backdrops of global and local contexts of poverty and the ecological emergency, he acknowledged the theological challenge they pose. His theological exposition on the well-known charge for humans to subdue and have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28) can be complemented by the advances in biblical ecological hermeneutics.³⁷ Doing so means addressing one of the not-so-obvious but implicit causes of our ecological emergency, viz. religion, mentioned above. For Lynn White, “What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the [hu]man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.”³⁸ How do we do this?

2. Colonization, ecology, religion: biblical-theological challenges and responses

As the devastating effects of the ecological emergency are felt globally especially in the Philippines,³⁹ more studies linking colonization, religion, and ecology must be done.⁴⁰ New developments on ecological biblical

33. *Ibid.*, 564–565.

34. Resil B. Mojares, “The Formation of Filipino Nationality Under U.S. Colonial Rule,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (2006): 12.

35. *Ibid.*, 13, 14.

36. Reynaldo D. Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads: Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015).

37. *Ibid.*, 40–42.

38. White, “Historical Roots,” 1206.

39. David Eckstein, Marie-Lena Hutfls, and Maik Wings, *Global Climate Risk Index 2019: Who Suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events? Weather-Related Loss Events in 2017 and 1998 to 2017* (Bonn: Germanwatch e.V., 2018), 4.

40. Vimal Tirimanna, “The FABC and Ecological Issues,” *Asian Horizons* 6, no. 2 (2012): 287–308; Thomas A. Reuter, “The Green Revolution in the World’s Religions: Indonesia Examples in International Comparison,” *Religions* 6 (2015): 1217–1231; Willis

hermeneutics aim to provide alternative insights that may confront our understanding and teaching of various theological disciplines. This challenge is even intensified by Pope Francis' call in *Laudato Si'* which correlates with White's call to reimagine religion. For the Pontiff, "to only seek a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system."⁴¹ He underlines, "A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal."⁴²

One of the important sources of *Laudato Si'*, the 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis on "care for our common home," is the groundbreaking 1988 document from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) under the leadership of Leonardo Legaspi, OP, DD. For Legaspi, "We will not be successful in our efforts to develop a new attitude towards the natural world unless we are sustained and nourished by a new vision. This vision must blossom forth from our understanding of the world as God intends it to be."⁴³ Legaspi underlined the biblical roots of this task and that "to work for justice and to preserve the integrity of creation are two inseparable dimensions of our Christian vocation to work for the coming of the kingdom of God in our times."⁴⁴ He added that a Filipino theology of creation is a must, in dialogue with our cultural and religious heritage, expressed in the teaching of our beliefs, in behavioral guidelines, and in the liturgical and worship celebrations of our justice, peace and integrity of creation efforts at our institutions.⁴⁵ The quest for justice, peace and integrity of creation should not only be treated as additional activities but should underpin or imbue everything we do.⁴⁶

In preparation for the 500th year of Christianity in the Philippines, the CBCP outlines various themes from 2013-2021. What is disappointingly absent, however, is that the theme of ecology/sustainability was not included in the program even if the country is very prone to climate disasters like Haiyan/Yolanda in 2013. It is, therefore, very encouraging that

Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, Routledge International Handbooks (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

41. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015, no. 111, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

42. *Ibid.*, no. 202.

43. Leonardo Legaspi, "What Is Happening To Our Beautiful Land," *CBCP online*, CBCPonline.net, January 29, 1988, <https://cbcponline.net/what-is-happening-to-our-beautiful-land/>.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

the Filipino youth proactively wrote an open letter to the church hierarchy on their critique, aspirations, and demands on our social life, education, and the environment in relation to economics, politics, and dialogue with cultures, especially with the Indigenous peoples.⁴⁷ In the CBCP's reply, Bp. Romulo Valles noted that these demands show how the youths want to be supported and how they have strength and capabilities to attain these dreams.⁴⁸ He cites again these aspirations of the youth in his 2019 letter which celebrates the Philippine Church's three Decades of Commitment to Ecological Concerns.⁴⁹ Valles echoes the Pope's insight that actions for the integrity of creation are considered the eighth work of mercy.⁵⁰ Valles cites Francis' agreement with Patriarch Bartholomew's call to acknowledge our contribution, express our contrition, and begin our actions for reparation and restitution by recognizing the inherent right of creatures.⁵¹ Valles underlined *Laudato Si'*'s call for a paradigm shift as we recognize our intergenerational responsibility and need for solidarity.⁵² Sifting through the practical implications that Valles enumerated, theologians and educators are tasked to (1) include the care of creation as our common home in our teaching and practice of Christian discipleship. (Psalm 8:4-9); (2) integrate *Laudato Si'* in the curriculum and strategic plans of Catholic educational institutions including seminaries and religious formations; and (3) popularize and incorporate the understanding of climate change and its mitigation in our formation programs. In this urgent letter, Valles cited some of the scriptural basis of the moral and religious dimension of the call to ecological conversion and actions, including Gen 1:21-22, 26-28. In 2022, the new CBCP president Bp. Pablo Virgilio S. David issued an even more audacious challenge to Catholic Christians and the hierarchical church to integrate care of creation as our common home in our teaching and praxis of Christian discipleship as manifested in responsible stewardship of resources, formation, and the

47. From the Filipino Youth 2019 Onwards, "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines," *CBCP News*, May 31, 2018, <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/an-open-letter-of-the-filipino-youth-to-the-catholic-church-in-the-philippines/>.

48. From the Filipino Youth 2019 Onwards; Romulo G. Valles, "Filipino Youth in Mission: Beloved, Gifted, Empowered," *CBCPonline.net*, December 2, 2018, <http://cbcponline.net/filipino-youth-in-mission-beloved-gifted-empowered/>.

49. Romulo G. Valles, "An Urgent Call for Ecological Conversion, Hope in the Face of Climate Emergency," *Cbcnews.com*, July 16, 2019, <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CBCP-Pastoral-Letter-on-Ecology-July-2019-1.pdf>.

50. *Ibid.*; Pope Francis, "Show Mercy to Our Common Home: Pope's Message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation," [vatican.va](http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/09/01/160901b.html), September 1, 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/09/01/160901b.html>.

51. Valles, "An Urgent Call for Ecological Conversion"; Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 69.

52. Valles, "An Urgent Call for Ecological Conversion"; Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, nos. 159–162.

defense of life and advancement of the rights of nature.⁵³ As believers who are exegetes and theologians, the duties to deepen the dialogue with *Laudato Si'* and other national and local legislations, to implement education and information campaigns about ecological conversion and the rights of nature, and to hold dialogue and learning platform with the lens and with wisdom from our Indigenous peoples become even more demanding.

Given these directives, theologians and biblical scholars are, therefore, tasked to reread the Scriptures and church teachings with ecological lens. Below are some practical pedagogies based on advances in global biblical interpretation which can be employed to reinterpret written, audiovisual, and performative texts for a more transformational and postcolonial biblical eco-theological formation. Each can be used on its own and in combination with the others.

The first two methods are from narrative criticism. The first one is a series of simple questions from American storyteller-theologian Megan McKenna.⁵⁴

1. How do you feel about the story? (for readers to enter/participate in the narrative by being in-touch with themselves)
2. What is true in the story? (for the universal character of the story to surface)
3. What is disturbing about the story? (for a more critical engagement with the story and generate new insights for contemporary times)

The second is a synchronic ecological reading of the received text using narrative analysis which focuses on its literary context, plot, setting, and the characters, or what David Rhoads call *characterization*.⁵⁵ For ecological education and theologizing, it is necessary to also characterize the beyond-human creatures in addition to God and people in reading salvation history.

Words of focus character + conclusion	Actions of focus character + conclusion
Words of other characters about or to the focus character + conclusion	Actions of other characters towards, for, or against the focus character + conclusion

Figure 1: Characterization Table

53. Pablo Virgilio S. David, "A Call for Unity and Action Amid a Climate Emergency and Planetary Crisis," *CBCP News*, January 28, 2022, <https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/a-call-for-unity-and-action-amid-a-climate-emergency-and-planetary-crisis/>.

54. Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 225.

55. David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* L, no. 3 (1982): 417, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/L.3.411>.

This simplified characterization table shows how the row above centers on the chosen character, especially the non-human creation. The row below, focuses on the other characters in the story. The first column contains the words of the characters while the second column shows their actions. Conclusions drawn from this simple method will enable readers to see the cooperation from *all* members of the creation community in the salvation narrative.

From here, a more systematic ecological reading can be done. The Earth Bible Project (EBP) of colleagues from natural and social sciences and the humanities in Australia headed by exegete Norman Habel suggests discerning any of the six ecojustice principles in the text:⁵⁶

- (1) Intrinsic worth: The universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value.
- (2) Interconnectedness: The Earth is a community of living things that are mutually dependent on each other's life and survival.
- (3) Voice: The Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice.
- (4) Purpose: The universe, Earth and all its components are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design.
- (5) Mutual Custodianship: The Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than rulers over, Earth to sustain its balance and a diverse Earth community
- (6) Resistance: Earth and its components not only suffer from human injustices but actively resist them in the struggle for justice.

South African systematic theologian Ernst Conradie underlines that these principles can be considered as alternative small dogmatics.⁵⁷ Intrinsic worth can be a new way of regarding creation while interconnectedness suggests an alternative ecclesiology. Voice can be a new anthropology which sees the humans as part of creation community, not above it. Purpose can be regarded as eschatology. Mutual custodianship can be seen as providence and can guide ecological ethics. Resistance can offer new insights on sin and redemption. These ecojustice principles can, thus, reimagine the various theological concepts and disciplines.

56. Norman Habel, "Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics," in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter L. Trudinger (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 2.

57. Ernst M. Conradie, "The Road Towards an Ecological Biblical and Theological Hermeneutics," *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 311.

In her critique and appreciation of the EBP, Hilary Marlow from England proposed determining from the biblical text an ecological triangle composed of God on top with the humans and non-humans on each side.⁵⁸ In this bible-text centered approach, she underlined the unique relations between these three characters. This method highlights God's independent relation with the humans and with non-humans. She, however, agrees with me on the needed modification that there is likewise an interlocking dynamic between *and among* these characters as seen in Figure 2.⁵⁹

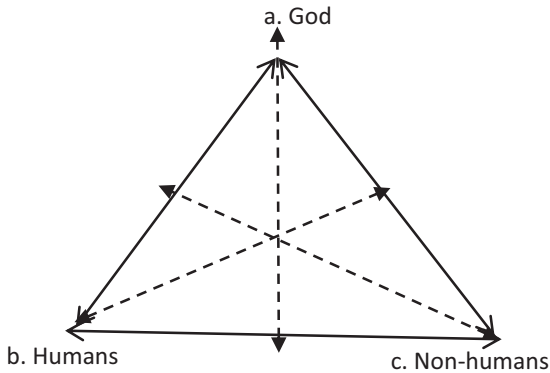


Figure 2: The “Modified” Ecological Triangle

For their part, Scandinavians Tina Nilsen and Anna Solevåg propose a postcolonial/anti-empire reading of texts (thus, ecolonial) by incorporating the Earth Charter, an international, intergenerational, and multi-sectoral “declaration of fundamental values and principles considered useful by its supporters for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society in the 21th century.”⁶⁰ Its four pillars are respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, socio-economic justice, and democracy, non-violence, and peace.⁶¹ Nilsen’s new trajectory, sustainability hermeneutics, further challenges how exegetes and theologians can incorporate in their works the 2030 United Nations Sustainable

58. Hilary Marlow, *Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Environmental Ethics: Re-Reading Amos, Hosea, and First Isaiah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89–94.

59. Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, *Micah 6:1–8: Rereading the Metaphors for YHWH, Israel and Non-Human Creation* (PhD diss., KU Leuven, Belgium, 2015), 184–86.

60. Tina Dyksteen Nilsen and Anna Rebecca Solevåg, “Expanding Ecological Hermeneutics: The Case for Ecolonialism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 4 (2016): 665–683, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1354.2016.3111>.

61. *Ibid.*, 674.

Development Goals signed by the United Nations and its member states for completion by 2030.⁶²

Finally, amidst the disturbing effects of the climate emergency and true to the Jewish-Christian narrative, Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd's "Normativity of the Future Approach," provide various questions to deepen the appreciation, critique, integration, and recontextualization of the Scriptures and authoritative texts today and inspire believers to participate in God's vision for the planet.⁶³ This approach brings all the other methods and texts to the level of both the near future and eschatology.

So, what now are the implications of ecological biblical hermeneutics in a postCovid-19 era?

3. Back to the beginning: a brief ecolonial-sustainability reading of Genesis 1

As White and Pope Francis mentioned above, individual and communal understandings of creator-creation relations need reimagining to respond to the environmental crisis. In this critical time characterized by post-human climate change, postglobal economics and politics that marginalize, as well as postnational migrations, all of which are made even worse by post-truth and the COVID-19 pandemic,⁶⁴ exegetes and theologians are impelled to reclaim religious myths and beliefs in a post-critical manner so that they can be recontextualized and serve as resources for dialogue with and strength and inspiration for those marginalized by global systems.⁶⁵

62. Tina Dykesteen Nilsen, "Sustainability Hermeneutics," *Biblical Interpretation* 31, no. 4 (2023): 391–414.

63. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd, "Introduction: The 'Normativity of the Future' Approach: Its Roots, Development, Current State and Challenges," in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* 61, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Leuven; Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2010), 3–25. See also its application on human rights by Mary Elsbernd (pp. 327–357) and on Romans 8:18–27 by Thomas Vollmer (pp. 167–196).

64. Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, "Changing World, Transforming God's Word: Narrative, Ecological and Future-Oriented Approaches to Scriptures," *Concilium: International Journal for Theology*, no. 3 (2022): 55; Fernando F. Segovia, "Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Visions and Task," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (2015): 6–29.

65. For a theoretical basis on how to read myths and authoritative texts post-critically, with recontextualization, and with maximal solidarity from a Christian/Catholic lenses, see Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens, "Framing the Identity of Catholic Schools: Empirical Methodology for Quantitative Research on the Catholic Identity of an Education Institute," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 2, no. 2 (2010): 193–211, <https://doi.org/10.180/19422539.2010.504034>.

One of the oft-quoted narrative in Jewish-Christian belief is the creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4a. Older interpretations reasonably sourced this text from Priestly writers or editors to counter the Babylonian myths of a chief god battling the sea since even from the beginning the Genesis account already demythologizes the sea.⁶⁶ Likewise, the reference to humans being inherently made in God's image and likeness subvert the Mesopotamian narrative that only an exceptional human is made in divine image.⁶⁷ In contrast with the Atrahasis epic which shows how the humans serve the gods, the sabbath command is unique in that it is God who finished the creative works and the humans are tasked to be stewards, not as slaves.⁶⁸ The uniqueness of its details compared to its contemporary myths show the creativity of the Genesis authors and editors.

In these critical times and using ecological hermeneutics, what new insights can this foundational Jewish-Christian story provide?

From the lens of the six ecojustice principles of the EBP, it is very evident how each one of God's creation has intrinsic worth, individually described as "good" and collectively as "very good." Their interconnectedness is seen as evening-morning flow from one day to the next. Purposive actions are observed in how days one to three formed the general milieu while days four to six provided the particulars, moving from being unfilled sky, water, and earth to being full of creatures that fly, swim, and roam the earth so they can thrive. Although unspecified in the text, each of the creatures have their distinctive voices and manner of communication between their kind and with God. Mutual custodianship is depicted in the provision of time, of darkness-light, of nourishment, and the command to flourish and procreate. Resistance against injustice reflects that when these principles are violated, ecological crisis results.

If we employ the modified ecological triangle to characterize both creator and creation, the six ecojustice principles are affirmed. Likewise, the narrative shows God's word is creative and purposive; that humans, made in God's image and likeness, are implicitly tasked to use words in co-creating a life-giving and not death-dealing world. Moreover, while traditionally the words "dominion" and "subdue" may mean ruling over and exploitation of non-humans, Phyllis Trible argues that these words are not encompassing and absolute and should be read within the context of harmony and responsibility.⁶⁹ For example, "The firmament is responsible

66. Richard S. Hess, "Genesis 1-2 and Recent Studies of Ancient Texts," *Science & Christian Belief* 7, no. 2 (1995): 143-144.

67. *Ibid.*, 145.

68. *Ibid.*, 146.

69. Phyllis Trible, "The Dilemma of Dominion," *Canon & Culture* 2 (2012): 14.

for controlling the waters. The greater light is responsible for ruling the day and the lesser light the night. The earth is responsible for producing vegetation and fruit. Both water and earth God charges to “bring forth living creatures.”⁷⁰ As the seventh day depicts God resting, so should all creatures. The Sabbath stops human economic activity that objectifies and exploits the other members of creation community. In Exodus 20:8-11, the Sabbath is observed because God rested after the six days of creation. In Deuteronomy 5:13-15, the Sabbath command reminds Israel that they were once slaves in Egypt. In sum, the modified ecological triangle shows God’s unique relationship between and among humans and non-humans and how God envisions the creation community’s interaction.

From a postcolonial/anti-empire lens, Genesis 1’s creation story resists against the gods and creation narrative of Babylon and Mesopotamia as described by the orderly storytelling of how God creates by word alone, denouncing the idea that God’s people were defeated and in exile because other gods are more powerful. Against this communal trauma of the exile, Genesis 1 resists identifying humans as slaves by countering how inherently they are made in God’s image and likeness. Against the concept of a chaotic world, God transforms chaos to cosmos, humans are made in divine image and likeness, non-humans are pronounced good, and altogether this order and rest are very good.

Employing the Earth Charter and the UNSDGs for a transformative ecological education, formation and conversion, the Priestly Genesis 1 creation story can also be reread as an anti-empire narrative which “updates” the Yahwist story in Genesis 2 because of the changed reality of God’s people in exile.⁷¹ In this genealogy, the storyteller historicizes the creation myth.⁷² When Genesis 1 dialogues with Indigenous stories, beliefs, and wisdom, the motivation of the Priestly authors can help push back against aggressive neocolonizing “development projects” that endanger both human and non-human creatures. One example is Leeroy New’s “Mebuyan Colony,” a 7-meter-high by 25-meter-long art installation at the Areté Amphitheater of the Ateneo de Manila University from 19 February 2022 to 16 December 2023. It is named after the Indigenous Bagobo goddess of death and fertility who is known to nurse the souls of deceased infants until they are able to continue their journey to the

70. *Ibid.*, 14.

71. See Edmund Hill, “How Historical Is Genesis 1-11?” *New Blackfriars* 58, no. 688 (1977): 403.

72. See Richard H. Moyer, “In the Beginning: Myth and History in Genesis and Exodus,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 4 (1990): 598, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267364>.

afterlife.⁷³ Installed during the pandemic, “Mebuyan Colony” integrates climate change, food security, and the intersections of urban studies, history, tourism, sociology, biology, theology, arts, etc. and interweave them for education, formation, and policy making. Another example is Vien Valencia’s “your age, my age, and the age of the river” work of art, a finalist at the *Fernando Zobel Prizes for Visual Arts – 2023 Ateneo Arts Awards* exhibited at the Ateneo Art Gallery from 11 September to 2 December 2023. Valencia cooperated with the Dumagat-Remontado Indigenous group in Tanay, Rizal. Using “frottage,” they traced the landscape of the Tinipak River by capturing the moment and the materiality of its rocks on the textile as a critique of the Kaliwa Dam project which endangers the site, culture, and environment of the community living in it.⁷⁴ The video documentation, the textiles, and the exhibition creatively denounce the Philippine government’s Kaliwa Dam project funded by China’s official development aid which was reviewed by the Senate because of questionable details.⁷⁵

Interpreted with the Genesis creation story in the background or foreground, the Mebuyan Colony and the memorialization of the Tinipak River influence our envisioning of an inclusive created world and a sustainable planet. One of the critical questions of the normativity of the future approach is the ethical implications of our interpretation of sacred and other authoritative texts. Here, Lee Cormie’s words resound:

...choosing sides for or against the poor and the oppressed, and for or against the earth itself is also inevitable. ... In making such choices, the forms of faith and hope that inspire us are revealed, and so are the gods we worship. ... The deepest challenge, then, to every reading of the Bible, and of the God revealed there, concerns its capacity to inspire concrete action in solidarity with all the oppressed, including the earth, and the redefinition of our identities, our communities, and our organizations...⁷⁶

73. Carla T. Gamalinda, “‘Mebuyan’s Colony’ by Leeroy New: Where All Things and Beings Connect,” *Philstar Life*, June 6, 2022, <https://philstarlife.com/geeky/416575-mebuyan-colony-leeroy-new?>.

74. Portia Placino, “From Gore to Humor: Finalists of the Ateneo Art Awards 2023,” *SPOT.PH*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.spot.ph/arts-culture/the-latest-arts-culture/106941/ateneo-art-awards-2023-20-years-of-recognition-a5224-20231101-lfrm>.

75. Ted Cordero, “MWSS: Kaliwa Dam Completed by 2026, Operational by 2027,” *GMA News Online*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/859375/mwss-kaliwa-dam-completed-by-2026-operational-by-2027/story/>; Cecille Suerte Felipe, “6 Other Philippines-China Projects Delayed; Senate Reviewing Deals,” *Philstar.Com*, October 30, 2023, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2023/10/30/2307627/6-other-philippines-china-projects-delayed-senate-reviewing-deals>.

76. Lee Cormie, “Revolutions in Reading the Bible,” in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. David Jobling, Peggy Lynne Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1991), 192.

Conclusion

Finding solutions to the complex climate emergency requires interdisciplinarity and global actions. Reclaiming beliefs and myths and how hi/stories are told are vital for planetary future. In November 2019, when Pope Francis mentioned ecological sin in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, reactions ranged from praising the church for its commitment to cynicism and outrage from those against the highly political issue.⁷⁷ Francis was affirming the proposal of the *Synod Fathers* for the Pan-Amazon Region to define ecological sin

as action or omission against God, against one's neighbour, the community and the environment. It is a sin against future generations and is manifested in acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment, in transgressions against the principles of interdependence and in the breaking of networks of solidarity between creatures (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 340-344).⁷⁸

In this contribution, we realized theologically the enormity and the implications of the ecological emergency. Faith groups, religious institutions, exegetes and theologians, and every believer must endeavor to multi-correlate biblical stories and theological concepts vis-à-vis the contemporary needs of the planet. People must partner together for inclusive prosperity and lasting peace. Just as our exiled biblical ancestors recontextualized and retold their faith narratives so should climate change transform religion and the interpretation of religious and authoritative texts. These insights from ecolonial-sustainability biblical hermeneutics and pedagogy modestly attempt to facilitate decolonizing our theologies and biblical interpretation so we could, indeed, inclusively build back better in these postCOVID-19 pandemic times.

77. Junno Arocho Esteves, "Ecological Sin: Idea of Updating Catechism Sparks Debate," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/faith/ecological-sin-idea-updating-catechism-sparks-debate>.

78. Pope Francis, "To Participants at the World Congress of the International Association of Penal Law," vatican.va, November 15, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191115_diritto-penale.html.

CHAPTER 2

TRANSITIONAL FACES OF THE CHURCH OF KINSHASA. THE DECOLONIZATION OF ECCLESIAL STRUCTURES IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Ignace Ndongala Maduku

The first encounter of the Kongo Kingdom with the Christian proposal dates back to the 15th century.¹ It was followed by other encounters, but these were in a context vitiated by imperialism against a background of colonial domination. The concomitance between evangelization and the formal colonization of the Congolese lands by the Kingdom of Belgium had perverse effects, as various research explains so well.² The church that was born in this context was the daughter of the church of the metropolis, whose structures it reproduced, adapting willy-nilly those that could be adapted and repeating identically those that were considered by some as constitutive of Catholicity. In fact, in a context where the mission was “a dilation of the cultural, political and economic frontiers of Christianity,”³ evangelization in a colonial context was a breeding ground for the coloniality of the power reinforced by the colonial State. Had the situation changed with the independence of the former Belgian colony?

It can be said that there were some attempts to adapt the church, as illustrated by the 6th assembly of the Congolese episcopate with its option in favor of the emergence of living communities, a committed laity and

1. See Kabolo Iko Kabwita, *Le royaume Kongo et la mission catholique 1700–1839. Du déclin à l'extinction* (Paris: Karthala, 2004); Luc Groegaert, *L'évangélisation du Royaume de Kongo et de l'Angola* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università gregoriana, 1996).

2. The mission was considered as “a relevant element of the ‘colonial’ system.” It generated a colonial Christianity (Jean-Marc Ela and Oscar Bimwenyi-Kweshi), a decomposing Christianity (Jean-Marc Ela), a Christianity of importation. See Jean Marc Ela, *Le cri de l'homme africain. Questions aux chrétiens et aux Églises d'Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1980), 43; Jean-Marc Ela, *Ma foi africain* (Paris: Karthala, 1985), 25, 191; Oscar Bimwenyi-Kweshi, *Discours théologique négro-africain. Problèmes de fondements* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1980), 238.

3. G. Alberigo, “Chrétienté et cultures dans l'histoire de l'Église,” in *Église et histoire de l'Église en Afrique. Actes du colloque de Bologne*, ed. Giuseppe Ruggieri (Paris: Beauchesne, 1988), xiii.

an adapted liturgy.⁴ This openness of the Congolese bishops was endorsed by the Second Vatican Council. It would receive a remarkable and noticeable boost around the 1970s with the policy of recourse to authenticity advocated by President Mobutu. If it is true that the valorization of African traditions by Mobutu had dictatorial aims and some anti-clerical overtones, it is no less true that it had boosted the path opened by the Africanization of the church postulated by the archbishop of Kinshasa.⁵ Indeed, summoned to resist the control of an authoritarian power that had sent him into exile in Rome,⁶ and determined to preserve Africanity in the face of a leveling approach to Catholicity, the archbishop of Kinshasa embarked on an enterprise of both renovation of ecclesial structures and empowerment of the laity and priests. Hereafter, I would like to illustrate how the 30 years of Cardinal Malula's episcopate puts into perspective a decolonial approach to ecclesial structures. I will do this in three points:

1. The decolonial virtualities of Cardinal Malula.
2. Some innovative options of Malula's episcopate.
3. What has the Malula legacy become today?

1. Cardinal Malula's decolonial virtualities

Born in 1917, Joseph-Albert Malula died in 1989.⁷ He was ordained priest in 1946, before becoming a bishop in 1959 and being created a Cardinal in 1969. His episcopate was notable for several reasons. First of all,

4. We take it for granted that the integration of Christianity into the whole of African cultural life has been a concern of the Congolese episcopate. Determined to make the church African in Africa, the Congolese episcopate emphasizes the centrality of the liturgy in the life of the church and the need to have the people participate actively and with enlightened faith in the liturgy. See *Épiscopat du Congo, Actes de la VI^e Assemblée plénière de l'Épiscopat du Congo. Léopoldville 1961 (20 novembre–2 décembre)* (Léopoldville: Éditions du Secrétariat Général de l'Épiscopat, 1961).

5. R. Kasuba, "Joseph Albert Malula: médiateur d'une nouvelle aube culturelle," in I. Ndongala Maduku (dir.), *Universalité de l'Église catholique et réalisation d'"une Église congolaise dans un État congolais."* *La pensée et l'œuvre du Cardinal J. A. Malula. Archevêque de Kinshasa. A l'occasion du Centenaire de sa naissance (1917 – 2017)* (Kinshasa: Éditions Paulines, 2020), 13–53.

6. Malula's denunciation of the outrageous secularism of President Mobutu's policies resulted in an open crisis between church and state.

7. Joseph-Albert Malula did not attend university. His profile and intellectual influence earned him two honorary doctorates, one from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (1979) and the other from Boston University (1980). Among the important responsibilities he assumed were presidency of the Episcopal Conference of Zaire (1979–1984), presidency of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SCEAM) (1984) and delegated presidency of the Extraordinary Synod (1985).

it was long in number of years. He was also noted for the audacity of his pastoral options, notably the fight for the independence of the Congo, the Africanization of the church, the inculturation of the liturgy and religious life, the structuring of the militancy of lay Christians, the defense of distributive justice, the emancipation of women, and his prospective approach to the future.

As we have stated elsewhere,⁸ although this point is not developed here, Malula was a consciousness-raiser who created in 1951 the group African Conscience.⁹ One of the objectives of this group was the emancipation of the Congolese. In terms of his political commitment, a fundamental point is that the publication of the Manifesto of African Consciousness decries “a political independence that would only be a means of enslaving and exploiting the Congolese.”¹⁰ From this point of view, Malula denounced the paternalism of the Jef Van Bilsen plan.¹¹ He advocated self-determination and the authenticity of the Black soul.¹² Independence undoubtedly has an important meaning and an inescapable scope for him: “Better that independence comes too soon than too late” he maintains.¹³ In this respect, he elaborated an ecclesial, pastoral, and socio-political project that was the apotheosis of the Belgian work in the Congo.

8. See Ignace Ndongala Maduku, *Religion et politique en RD Congo. Marche des chrétiens et paroles des évêques sur les élections* (Paris: Karthala, 2016), 84–86.

9. *Ibid.*, 84. See for example Jacques Vanderlinden, *La crise congolaise* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1985), 45 s. Opinions are divided as to the date of this Manifesto. Jacques Vanderlinden places the creation of “Conscience africaine” in 1951. See Jacques Vanderlinden, *La crise congolaise, op. cit.*, 27. Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem places it in 1951: Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem *Histoire générale du Congo: de l'héritage ancien à la République démocratique du Congo* (Bruxelles and De Boeck & Larsier: Duculot and Afrique-Editions, 1998), 514; Jean-Bruno Mukanya Kaninda-Muana places it in 1952: Jean-Bruno Mukanya Kaninda-Muana, *Église catholique et pouvoir au Congo/Zaire. Enjeux, options et négociations du changement social à Kinshasa, 1945-1997* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 58.

10. The Manifesto opts for the rejection of assimilation and the independence of the Congo. To read more on the manifesto, see G. Libois, ed., *Documents Belges et africains*, 2nd edition (Bruxelles: CRISP, 1961), 9–16; Léon de Saint Moulin, *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, t. 6 (Kinshasa: FCK, 1992), 301–309; Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo: de l'héritage ancien*, 514–517. For a brief analysis of this document, see Jacques Vanderlinden, *La crise congolaise*, 55–58. According to this author, the manifesto was written by Congolese. See also *Revue du Clergé africain*, t. 11, no. 5, September 1956, 506.

11. The Belgian academic proposed a thirty-year plan for the emancipation of the Belgian Congo. The challenge, according to him, was to prepare the Congolese elite for their new functions. See A. J.-J. Van Bilsen, *Trente ans pour l'émancipation politique de l'Afrique belge* (s. l.: s. e., 1956).

12. Malula, “Les aspirations politiques de l'âme noire,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 3, t. 143d, 33.

13. J. Bruls, “Les Églises,” in *Les Églises chrétiennes et la décolonisation*, ed. M. Merle (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1967), 349.

In thirty years of episcopacy, Malula acted as a founding bishop of the post-conciliar Church of Kinshasa, he said, “in the same way as the Fathers of the first centuries of the church.”¹⁴ Building his ministry on the foundation of truth and keeping fraternity as the birthplace of his spirituality, he made it the “valeur mobilisatrice” (mobilizing value) of his episcopate.¹⁵ He did not see the episcopate as a favor or a privilege, but as a responsibility, a responsibility before God and mankind, with the sole aim of not betraying Africa.¹⁶ In this line, we understand the lapidary expression “a Congolese Church in a Congolese State,” which became the leitmotif of his socio-political commitment and of his episcopate. A conviction underpinned it: “All the mystery contained in the universal church is found in the particular church that the bishop directs.”¹⁷ He understands this leadership as a doctor, pontiff and pastor, like the other bishops spread throughout the world.¹⁸ Malula’s uncomplicated approach to the episcopate contrasts with the unreasoned obedience of the bishops he calls “Occidentaux à la peau noire”¹⁹ (Westerners with black skin), those who are still locked into the modes of Western Christianity,²⁰ formed according to “absolute and immutable principles, untouchable and applicable to any reality and situation; serving as a universal postulate for everything, an indisputable, axiomatic postulate.”²¹ Malula challenges scholasticism and all theological language made elsewhere. He denounces the weight and the after-effects of the complexes of men conditioned by a century of colonization.²²

14. Malula, “Un fondateur d’une Église particulière africaine,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol 3, t. 164d, 99.

15. By “valeurs mobilisatrices” we mean ultimate values and norms, “collective ideals” which, in consonance with the great objectives that the religious organization has set for itself at a given moment in history, and this, with regard to the concrete historical and political conjunctures, the cultural dimensions and the expectations of the actors, influence the practices of the religious actors. These values underlie the intentional acting-together of the actors of the religious organization. Susceptible to changes and reforms, the mobilizing values offer a culture, that is to say a structure of values and norms, a way of thinking, a mode of apprehension of the world which instills a dynamic to the practices. On this notion, see I. Ndongala Maduku and J. Mwana-Kitata, *Mots sur les maux du Congo. Le discours sociopolitique de Laurent Cardinal Monsengwo Pasinya* (Paris: L’Harmattan), 22.

16. Malula, “L’évêque africain aujourd’hui et demain. Réflexions personnelles et Méditations personnelles de 20 ans d’Épiscopat,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. Leon de Saint Moulin, vol. 3, t. 164a, 90.

17. *Ibid.*, 91.

18. *Ibid.*, 92.

19. *Ibid.*, 93.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, from 93.

22. *Ibid.*, from 93.

His analysis of colonization is uncompromising: “Years of colonization have led us to borrow, without prior examination, ideas or institutions from other horizons than our own [...] an easy solution which obviously leads to the loss of our identity.”²³ Among the bishops who fall prey to the mirages of colonization, and those who are captives of the unique and universal model, he places the African bishops who show a deficit of independence of spirit and find themselves clamped in the molds of a Western Christianity. The independence of spirit that characterizes Malula makes him an authentic and truly free bishop,²⁴ who feels and acts like a “Negro,” in an autonomous way.²⁵ It leads him to maintain that it is appropriate to leave the beaten track and to go, if necessary, beyond the so-called traditional dispositions of the church, described as “Roman.”²⁶ And to conclude with his usual frankness: “We are not propagandists of Romanity.”²⁷

2. Some innovative options in Malula’s episcopate

Malula distinguished himself as a bishop who was very much in love with the Africanization of the church. Recognizing and respecting the work of the missionaries, he considered their heritage as a richness to be brought to fruition, an asset to be brought to light and never to be kept as it was. Thus, his conception of the church was no longer the pre-conciliar one that had seen him born and grow. With the Second Vatican Council and out of loyalty to Africa, he distanced himself from any pyramidal approach to the church. He broke with the societal ecclesiology and the ideology of the *societas inaequalis, hierarchica et perfecta*. Turning his back on any monocratic structure that disqualified the laity and empowered the priests, he gave his diocese the contours of a family supported by fraternity rather than organized according to the asymmetrical relationships of a hierarchy.

In his eyes, the church is not “imported from the outside, but it is the unfolding to maturity of the seed of life expressing itself by forming a Christian people.”²⁸ Hence his ambition: to give a truly Congolese face to the mission and thus “to promote the emergence of an authentically Black

23. Malula, “Allocution à la messe d’action de grâces le 29 juin 1970,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 6, t. 702, 343.

24. Malula, “L’évêque africain aujourd’hui et demain. Réflexions personnelles et Méditations personnelles de 20 ans d’Épiscopat,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 3, t. 164a, 94.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 99.

27. *Ibid.*, 97.

28. Malula, “L’Église particulière, ses exigences et ses structures,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 4, t. 296, 22.

African Church,”²⁹ one that has a truly Congolese face in its theological and philosophical expression, in evangelization and also in its liturgy. Theological and philosophical expression, evangelization and liturgy, so many domains that until then had been conformed according to a unique model that could not be reformed, but that Malula was going to irrigate with a dynamism that brought about change. The result will be the emergence of a fully African Church, creative and truly responsible for itself.³⁰

We can see here a new approach to mission that reverses the usual God-Church-World perspective in favor of the God-World-Church perspective. This means that the purpose of mission is no longer to enter the church and make it sacramental, but rather to transform society into a “world that God wants” in a specific and intensive way. In order to make this change concrete, the Congolese Cardinal is working on the search for a new ecclesial organization. He is rethinking the ways in which Christians act and linking the ecclesial culture with fraternity. In this way, it breaks with the consecrated approach of uniform ecclesial structures. He rejects the discriminating definitions of the role and functions of laity and priests. He thus commits himself to an interior reform that affects the diocese, parishes, seminaries, the definitions of the role and functions of laity and priests. He is therefore committed to an internal reform that affects the diocese, the parishes, the seminaries, the structures of dialogue, and consequently the priests and the laity.

After independence, Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, experienced accelerated urbanization. A segment of the city of Kinshasa, the diocese now under the leadership of Malula is in the grip of modernity. To meet the challenges of social change, Malula had restructured his diocese into three apostolic regions.³¹ Rather than sticking to the traditional parish-centered pastoral approach, the Congolese Cardinal envisions “bombarding the parishes to break them up into small, human-sized communities.”³² To make the parishes correspond to the city of Kinshasa, he decided on a new division that would fit the changing urban reality: the basis ecclesial communities (CEBs). Thanks to this instance of primary socialization that promotes fraternal relationships, the laity takes charge of many services, and some of these will become ministries. While still governed by the 1917 code,

29. Malula, “L’Église à l’heure de l’africanité,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 3, t. 154a, 51.

30. Malula, “Communication concernant le projet de confier certaines paroisses à des laïcs,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 6, t. 630, 182.

31. Malula, “L’évêque africain aujourd’hui et demain. Réflexions personnelles et Méditations personnelles de 20 ans d’Épiscopat,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 3, t. 164, 104.

32. Malula, *L’Église à l’heure de l’africanité* (Kinshasa: Saint Paul Afrique, 1973), 11.

which knew only one face of the parish, Malula introduced an innovation with another face: parishes entrusted to the laity. This is a point worth emphasizing, especially since well before the promulgation of the 1983 Code, Malula instituted three lay ministries: the ministry of parish assistant and that of pastoral animator, both open to lay men and women; and the ministry of *bakambi*, lay parish leader, reserved for men.³³

There is no longer any doubt that, with Malula, the mission is no longer the prerogative of priests or the privilege of men. The sociability of urban neighborhoods through a device adjoining the territorialized network and linked to the neighborhood of residence will inspire a new architecture of the houses of formation of future priests. In fact, everything fits together harmoniously and logically in Malula's work. For an authentically African Church, he was going to form "priests who were authentically priests, that is, passionate about the service of Christ, and authentically patriotic, that is, committed to the service of their country."³⁴ This is a far cry from the Tridentine model and that of missionary Christianity. The renewed approach to the identity of the priest led him to reintegrate the seminaries into the life of the recipients of the good news. From the suburbs of the city, the seminaries are implanted in the heart of the capital. Moreover, their architecture becomes a concretization of his ecclesial project articulated around the fraternity. The formation which is given there becomes a self-formation leaning on a reorganization of the "curriculum of theological studies."³⁵ In short, seminaries become a "generative and reflective learning community" that promotes mutual knowledge and recognition.³⁶

With regard to the laity, it is worth mentioning an institution set up by Cardinal Malula to promote dialogue: "l'évêque à l'écoute" (the listening bishop). It is essentially a time for listening to what the Spirit is saying to

33. About these ministries, see L. Santedi, ed., *L'avenir des ministères laïcs. Enjeux ecclésiologiques et perspectives pastorales. Actes du Colloque célébrant le 20^{ème} anniversaire de l'Institution des Ministères laïcs à Kinshasa (du 19 au 24/11/1995)* (Kinshasa: Signes des Temps, 1995). See also our article, "Femmes et Hommes partenaires égaux de l'Église-famille de Dieu dans la réalité ecclésiale de Kinshasa?" *Mission de l'Église* 150 (2006): 67–70.

34. L. Santedi "Introduction," in *L'avenir des ministères laïcs*, vol. 3, 234; Malula, "Ouverture de l'année académique à Saint Kaggwa," in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 3, t. 244, 291.

35. See I. Ndongala Maduku and R. Isay Onkiri, *Le sacerdoce: un métier vocationnel? Essai sur les recompositions du ministère presbytéral en RD Congo* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021), 212.

36. On this notion, see Fairtlough, *The Three Ways of Getting Things Done* (Dorset: Triarchy Press, 2005); R.-P. Chait, et al., *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005). This model was promoted at John Paul I Seminary under the leadership of Father Michel Gerard. It consolidated the responsible autonomy and heterarchy of the seminarians. Elaborations on the putting aside of the hierarchy can be found in I. Ndongala Maduku and R. Isay Onkiri, *Le sacerdoce: un métier vocationnel?* 195–205.

the Church of Kinshasa through the reading of the signs of the times and listening to the pastoral agents.³⁷ There is much to be said for the way in which Malula moved away from an approach to the church and its mission inherited from colonization. In the same vein, there is reason to question today the ecclesiological and social consequences of his theology as well as of his pastoral action.

3. What has the Malula legacy become today?

The question deserves to be asked thirty-four years after Malula's death. It is very relevant in light of the current situation of the church in Kinshasa.³⁸ Yesterday's mission territory, now a local church with a local hierarchy, this church was illustrated under Malula as forever committed to the side of God who promised a new heaven and a new earth where justice will dwell (2 Peter 3:13, cf. Isaiah 43:19). As an authentically African Church, faithful to Christ and to Africa, it was entrusted with the task of the heirs. What has it become today if not a church in the grip of a latent restoration, crossed by some hints of colonial practices and re-occidentalization?

We observe a softening of the ecclesiology and a softening of the African churches into "carbon copies" of the Western churches.³⁹ Rather than becoming Africanized, they are becoming more and more Romanized, while the image of the family church is being gargled with. The institutions and structures bequeathed by Malula are today in a state of collapse. The CEBs are vegetating, the *bakambi* no longer exist; Kinshasa no longer has two types of parish, but only one, as in the entire Roman Catholic Church; the seminaries, conceived as crucibles of fraternity and organized for a community life in small teams, have turned into large complexes of

37. Malula, "L'évêque à l'écoute 1978," in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, ed. L. de Saint Moulin, vol. 4, 318g, 69. Read also I. Ndongala Maduku, "L'évêque à l'écoute, un chemin de synodalité. Hommage posthume au Père Léon de Saint Moulin," in *Telema* 2, no. 19 (2020): 74–91.

38. If it is true that a good fringe of the Christians of Kinshasa draws on the Malula heritage and preserves it, the hierarchy and the priests who did not know Malula ignore and vilify his heritage. We are delighted that Pope Francis has discovered the importance of the Zairian rite of which he is the instigator. Tomorrow, the Bishop of Rome will surely discover Malula's years on the laity, especially his innovations on lay ministries.

39. In the eyes of African theologians, particularly J.-M. Ela, corrupted by the colonial mortgage, these churches were "appendages of the metropolitan churches without their own personality" (J.-M. Ela, *Le cri de l'homme africain*, 81), "churches born with symptoms of early age" (J.-M. Ela, *Ma foi d'africain* (Paris: Karthala, 1985), 23), "branches of the rich churches" (J.-M. Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine. Le Dieu qui libère* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 173), "churches under perfusion" (J.-M. Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine*, 398).

Tridentine inspiration; the water table supplying priests who are authentically patriotic, that is, committed to the service of their country, has dried up; the theology of inculturation developed at the Catholic University of Congo navigates between culturalism and political neutrality. It remains little inclined to questions of coloniality and produces a theological knowledge of a colonial type.⁴⁰ In short, it is a return to the ecclesiology of yesteryear, a regression to a regime of conformity to a universal model of the local church. It is an understatement to say that this model reconduces the coloniality of power.

Conclusion

We have tried to illustrate here how, through his speeches and his pastoral action, or rather through his way of being, thinking and doing, Malula had laid the foundations for a decolonial approach to the reality of the church. Certainly, the register was not Latin American, i.e., thought in the framework of the slave past, but rather grasped from the colonial past and the neo-colonial present characteristic of his country. The critique of the colonial framing of the mission and its false fidelity to Catholicity set his local church on the path of rejecting the coloniality of power underlying the Christian proposal, its triumphant rhetoric and its fenced-in structures. The path followed for this illustration was adjacent to the thirty years of episcopacy of the Congolese Cardinal. The pastoral options of his episcopate are plausible and suggestive. Their audacity is measured, on the one hand, in the rejection of dominant ecclesial conceptions, the criticism of a subjugating de-Westernization and the reprobation of the subalternization of inculturation, and on the other hand, in the real political dimension of the church's commitment to justice, the break with the models of churches defined once and for all *ne varietur*, the advances of an uncomplicated approach to episcopal responsibility, the achievements of the mobilizing value of fraternity and the new approach to the mission of laity and priests.

To say everything about the contribution of the Malula episcopate to the decolonization of ecclesial structures would have been impossible in the time allotted to us. The little that we have said about it should help, we hope, to define the face-lifts to be recommended to tone up the face of the Church of Kinshasa and give it an adult face without the frills of ecclesial colonization.

40. See I. Ndongala Maduku, "Quand le Dieu qui libère vient aux marges. Lecture des postérités de la théologie sous l'arbre de Jean-Marc Ela," in Jean-Marc Ela: *Une éthique de la transgression*, ed. C. Monga (Paris: Karthala, 2022), 109–124.

CHAPTER 3

POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND THEOCRATIC RULE IN THE SPANISH CONQUEST AND COLONIZATION OF THE PHILIPPINES

John D. Blanco

1. A theology of conquest in the age of decolonization

In 1950, Dominican preacher and professor Fr. Jesús Gayo y Aragón (OP) published a lecture entitled “Ideas jurídico-teológicas de los Religiosos de Filipinas en el siglo XVI sobre la conquista de las Islas” [Juridico-Theological Ideas of the Philippine Religious on the Conquest of the Islands in the Sixteenth Century].¹ Gayo y Aragón’s essay was translated into English in 1993 under the title *The Theology of the Conquest*; and became one of the primary points of reference for vindicating or at least qualifying the otherwise negative view of the religious as the most stalwart defenders of Spanish colonial rule up to the nineteenth century.² In the essay, Gayo y Aragón contended that, far from being mere apologists of colonial rule, much less the corrupt and rapacious predators documented in nineteenth-century national martyr Dr. José Rizal’s work, the very early Spanish friars fought for justice and fraternity: to the point of questioning the very legitimacy of Spanish rule over the archipelago itself.³ A later essay by the

1. Fr. Jesús Gayo y Aragón, *Discurso leído en la solemne apertura del curso académico 1950-1951, Tema: Ideas jurídico-teológicas de los Religiosos de Filipinas en el siglo XVI sobre la conquista de las Islas* (Manila: University of Santo Tomás Press, 1950).

2. Gayo y Aragón, *The Theology of the Conquest*, trans. Jose Abriol et al. (Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1993).

3. For a selection of José Rizal’s work, see *Poesía completa; Ensayos escogidos* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2014), which contains his most representative essays on the central role of the friars and Christianity in Spanish colonialism. See also his novels *Noli me tangere* (*Touch Me Not*), trans. Harold Augenbraum (London: Penguin, 2006) and *El filibusterismo*, trans. Harold Augenbraum (London: Penguin, 2011). For an incisive portrait of Rizal’s religious ideas and belief, see Miguel de Unamuno’s epilogue to Wenceslao E. Retana, *Vida e escritos del Dr. José Rizal* (Madrid: Librería General de V. Suárez, 1907), 475–498. Gayo y Aragón’s 1950 essay was clearly inspired by the earlier work of Lewis Hanke, whose book *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of the America* aspired to challenge Spain’s “black legend” for the decimation of Amerindian societies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through the life and work of Dominican friars Fr. Bartolomé de las Casas (OP) and Antonio Montesinos (OP). Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of the America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1949).

author recapitulates and extends this argument by highlighting the role of the religious in negotiating the terms under which Spanish king Philip II came to claim possession or “just title” of the Philippines.⁴

Several years after Gayo y Aragón’s publication in 1950, a somewhat different take on the contribution of the religious appeared in a 1957 article by John Phelan under the title: “Some Ideological Aspects of the Conquest of the Philippines.”⁵ In many ways, one may see Phelan’s article as a continuation and completion of the work Gayo y Aragón proposed to do: revisiting the tumultuous closing decades of the sixteenth century to the articulation of a legal justification for the Spanish presence in the Philippines, as well as the Crown’s claim to the just title of possession over the islands and Spanish sovereignty over its peoples. Like Gayo y Aragón, too, Phelan painstakingly traced the debates taking place in the Philippines to the work of the famous Dominican friar and advocate of Native rights in the Americas, Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas (OP), as well his confrere, Salamanca theologian, philosopher, and jurist Fr. Francisco de Vitoria (OP).⁶ At the same time, however, and in stark contrast to Gayo y Aragón’s perspective, Phelan concluded that the legitimation of the conquest did not come from Las Casas, but rather from the opinion of his nemesis, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda.⁷ The latter, as we may know, maintained that the legitimacy of conquest had to be based on Native inferiority, the Aristotelian notion of natural slavery, and the supposed need for Spaniards to “protect” Indigenous people from both the tyranny of their leaders and the evil of their abhorrent customs. Indeed, as the title to Phelan’s essay seems to imply, the question of the religious role in the justification of the conquest had less to do with the extension of theological precepts into the political arena than it had to do with the political development of an ideology of world empire in the sixteenth century.⁸

4. See Gayo y Aragón, “The Controversy over Justification of Spanish Rule in the Philippines,” in *Studies in Philippine Church History*, ed. Gerald Anderson (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969).

5. John L. Phelan, “Some Ideological Aspects of the Conquest of the Philippines,” *The Americas* 13, no. 3 (January 1957): 221–239.

6. To erase any doubt regarding this connection, Phelan states in his essay’s introduction: “One thing is beyond contention. Vitoria’s thought had a decisive impact on the Philippines. The ideological controversy precipitated by the conquest of the archipelago often assumed the character of a creative commentary on the lectures of that great Dominican theologian.” *Ibid.*, 221.

7. *Ibid.*, 239.

8. It is interesting to note that much of Phelan’s critical view of the religious disappears in the later publication of his seminal work, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses 1565-1700* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 1959. In its place the latter promotes the theory of “partial Hispanization,” based on the Spanish “aim” of Christianization and the Native “response” of resistance and partial accommodation. For a

One might dismiss the Gayo y Aragón-Phelan debate as a purely academic exercise involving antiquated notions of peace and justice, were it not for the fact that Las Casas and Vitoria, as well as the legacy of Christianity in the West more broadly, had become surprisingly contemporary subjects in the age of decolonization. The same year that Gayo y Aragón's essay was published (1950), famous Martinican author and politician, as well as co-founder of the Négritude movement in the arts and politics Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) delivered an address before the United Nations excoriating the role played by Christianity in the colonization of the non-Western world. In *Discourse on Colonialism* [Discours sur colonialisme], Césaire underlined the fundamental contribution of Christianity to notions of Western civilization that ultimately justified and reinforced colonial rule as well as the “problem of the proletariat.”⁹ “The hypocrisy [of associating colonization with civilization],” the author writes

...is of recent date...the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations *Christianity=civilization*, *paganism=savagery*, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the Yellow peoples, and the Negroes.¹⁰

In pages that anticipate the philosopher Hannah Arendt's magisterial work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1952) by a year, Césaire sketched the primary consequence of these fateful equations: the “decivilization” of the colonizer, which contributed to the rise of Nazism.¹¹

Where does the Gayo y Aragón-Phelan debate fit in all this? Does it share the same stake as the apologists or militant antagonists of colonial rule in the age of decolonization? As the decade wore on, both sides of the conflicts in Vietnam (formerly French Indochina), Korea, and Algeria looked to the newfound independence of countries like the Philippines and Indonesia (formerly the Dutch East Indies) for lessons on the promises and challenges of fledgling republics after World War II. This paper takes as its point of departure the points of debate between Gayo y Aragón and Phelan, which drew upon an awareness of the decolonization movements without being directly embroiled in them. This interaction had wider implications for diagnosing the impact of colonial legacies in the

critique of this theory, see John D. Blanco, *Counter-Hispanization in the Colonial Philippines* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2023), 24–29.

9. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 31.

10. *Ibid.*, 32.

11. See Hannah Arendt, “Imperialism,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017).

post-colonial Philippines: particularly the role the church would play in narrating the country's path to nationhood, as well as its stake in influencing the outlines of a nationalist pedagogy.

2. The political theology of Spanish rule overseas

Césaire's intervention in 1950 was soon followed by not only Arendt's *magnus opus*, but also a lengthy and impassioned controversy among French Catholics beginning in 1954 over the Algerian War and the colonial question more broadly. At its center lay the opposing ideas of Fr. Joseph Michel, a Spiritan missionary who worked with both French and French Algerian students, and Fr. Joseph-Vincent Ducattillon (OP), provincial superior of the Dominican Order in France.¹² Fr. Michel incited the debate with the publication of his essay "Le devoir de décolonisation" [A Duty to Decolonize] in which he maintained the existence of a "Catholic colonial ethic" to be found in the work of Fr. Vitoria.¹³ This ethic, while never fully or explicitly articulated by the church, nevertheless anticipated and advocated for the end of colonial rule despite also, paradoxically, assisting kings and governors in its establishment and maintenance. Fr. Michel's essay prompted Fr. Ducattillon's response. The latter also drew from Fr. Vitoria's work yet reached the opposite conclusion: rather than a "duty to decolonize," Ducattillon saw in the Catholic jurisprudence of the sixteenth century a "theology of colonization." This theology, the latter claimed, arose out of Vitoria's early assertion of a universal "law of nations" [*jus gentium*], which guaranteed the freedom of travel, trade, citizenship by settlement, and (for missionaries), the "right to preach and declare the gospel in barbarian lands."¹⁴ These rights, which Vitoria also assumed to form the bedrock of natural law, were sufficient justification for French colonial settlement and dominion over Algeria, notwithstanding popular resistance to French rule by the Muslim majority.

Gayo y Aragón's 1950 essay *Ideas jurídico-teológicas* fits rather uneasily into the debates of his French contemporaries. For one thing, in contrast to the independence movements taking place throughout Africa and Southeast Asia after World War II, the Philippines had been "granted" its independence by the United States in 1946. For many scholars and

12. See Elizabeth Foster, "Theologies of Colonization," in *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 95–123.

13. Joseph Michel, "Le devoir de décolonisation," *Mémoire Spiritaine* 4, no. 2 (1996): 130–154. Much of the journal issue is dedicated to Michel's life and work.

14. Cited in James Brown Scott, *The Catholic Conception of International Law* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1934), 488–489.

statesmen, of course, this presumed gesture of US benevolence did little to resolve the problems of extreme wealth inequality, national sovereignty, and corruption—in this case, the complicity of national leaders with the Japanese Empire.¹⁵ Throughout the countryside in the years following 1946, the Hukbalahap rebellion (Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon, or National Army Against Japan (“Huk” rebellion for short) evolved from popular guerrilla resistance to Japanese rule (1942–1945) to a full-fledged rebellion against the newly established Philippine republic. Yet even as the decade succeeding World War II would give rise to liberation movements in Dutch Indonesia, French Vietnam (Indochine) and Algeria, and British Kenya, the Philippine government consolidated its legitimacy around populist president Ramon Magsaysay; and distanced itself from the more radical issues of land and wealth redistribution, protectionism, and the removal of US military bases. At the Bandung Conference convened by Indonesian president Sukarno in April 1955, Philippine ambassador Carlos P. Romulo stood out for his refusal to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of nations, which agreed to remain neutral to either the US-NATO bloc or the USSR in the politics of the Cold War.¹⁶

At the same time, however, the postwar period of Philippine independence also ushered in a new and belated reckoning with the colonial past—Spanish as well as American. Writers, intellectuals, and statesmen alike grappled with Western legacies of religion, language, education, and culture even as the Philippines entered the family of nations with an underdeveloped, agrarian-based economy and the decimation of the capital city Manila from repeated bombings by the Japanese and Americans.¹⁷ The paradoxes of this reckoning manifested themselves in the contradictory positions of writers like Jesús Balmori, a peninsular Spanish writer of longtime residence in Manila, who advocated for US victory over the Japanese empire even as he acknowledged the extinction of the Spanish language and culture in the Philippines at the hands of Anglo-Saxon education.¹⁸ Moreover, the massive

15. See David J. Steinberg, *Philippine Collaboration in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967).

16. For a first-person account of the dynamic between Romulo and his peers from other southeast Asian countries and India, see Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1956).

17. The near total destruction of Manila was only surpassed by that of Warsaw during World War II. See Alfonso Aluit, *By Sword and Fire: The Destruction of Manila in World War II (3 February–3 March 1945)* (Manila: Bookmark, 1995). For the peculiarity of post-war agreements between the US and Filipino elites over the reconstruction of the nation's economy and society, see James Putzel, *A Captive Land: The Politics of Agrarian Reform in the Philippines* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992).

18. On the work of Jesús Balmori, see Irene Villaescusa Illán, *Transcultural Nationalism in Hispano-Filipino Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 155–193.

population flight from Manila during the wartime years provided a fertile environment for the growth of challenges to Catholic orthodoxy, as witnessed by the rise of churches like the *Iglesia ni Cristo* after World War II.¹⁹ In Manila, however, the pro- and anticlerical positions around the overweening influence of the church in secular affairs resumed their battles as if the war had not even taken place.²⁰ When the newly elected Philippine Congress attempted to make the reading of José Rizal's novels and essays mandatory in secondary education, they were met by stiff opposition from religious leaders, who, for example, maintained the right of private (religious) institutions to continue to censor Rizal's works.²¹

Between the vicissitudes of revolutionary movements throughout the non-Western world and the struggle to reconcile the Spanish colonial past with the newly post-colonial Philippine republic, Gayo y Aragón and Phelan's studies of the response of early missionaries to the conquest take their readers out of the tumultuous present and deposit them right in the middle of a controversy at the origins of the Spanish conquest: was the conquest of the Philippines justifiable on theological grounds? Or to put it another way: did the early church in the Philippines, led primarily by the mendicant religious orders, sanction the conquest by drawing on the theological principles and points of debate regarding the colonization of the Americas during the sixteenth century? The responses of both authors consider two separate and sometimes divergent points of reference for understanding the role of theology in the conquest. The first concerns the influence of Vitoria and Las Casas, both writers and advocates for a strong legal justification of Spain's claim to its overseas possessions, on Spanish king Philip II in his instructions to the explorers and early Spanish settlers in the archipelago. The second concerns the interpretation of Vitoria and Las Casas's judgments by Philippine missionaries and the governor general in terms of their applicability to the conquest overseas.

As we know, the writings of Las Casas best illustrate the resistance of the religious ministers to the excesses of colonial violence and impunity that took place with the arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean and later,

19. See Robert Reed, "The Iglesia ni Cristo, 1914-2000. From obscure Philippine faith to global belief system," in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, The Philippines Historical and Social Studies* 157, no. 3 (2001): 561-608.

20. For a background of church advocacy to keep religious instruction as mandatory in primary and secondary education, see Reynaldo Iletto, "Heroes, Historians, and the New Propaganda Movement, 1950-1953," *Philippine Studies* 58, no. 1-2, Festschrift in Honor of Fr. John N. Schumacher, SJ (June 2010): 223-238.

21. See Constantino, "Veneration Without Understanding," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 1, no. 4 (1972): 17; and Caroline Hau, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), 15-47.

the conquest of Mexico, renamed *Nueva España* (New Spain).²² The atrocities committed by the Spanish conquistadors not only contradicted the Christian message of universal emancipation from sin, but also impeded the communication of this message to non-Christian victims. This anomaly, which contributed to the depopulation of the Americas on a catastrophic scale, led Spanish king Charles V to consult with Dominican philosopher, theologian, and jurist Fr. Francisco de Vitoria (OP) on the limits to Spain's claim to the lands it had presumably discovered. Vitoria's lectures (*relectiones*) on the subject, along with Las Casas's debate with Spanish jurist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda over the rights of Native peoples, set in motion an inquiry into the very possibility of universal laws and (human) rights, which anticipated the future foundations of international law in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²³

While Charles's efforts to put Vitoria's interpretations into practice overseas (in 1542) led to failure, Charles's successor Philip II wielded the Crown's proxy leadership and patronage of the church overseas [*Patronato Real*] to promote the spread of Christianity in a way that also reinforced Spain's just title to dominion over its overseas territories. This included the enforcement of obligations imposed upon the Crown's overseas (colonial) subjects. Thus, the bestowal of the name "Philippines" to the Pacific islands originally claimed by Spanish field commander or *Adelantado* Miguel López de Legazpi for Spain symbolized not only Philip's accession to the throne in 1566 but also the latter's determination to make Christianization and Spanish rule coextensive and reciprocal.

This historical backdrop serves as a frame for Gayo y Aragón's presentation of the early missionary response to the Spanish conquest of the Philippines. In fact, it is upon Philip's Christian piety and commitment to an idea of peaceful colonization that Gayo y Aragón's argument hinges. Gayo y Aragón highlights how the early Augustinian missionaries that had accompanied Legazpi (who founded the city of Manila) or that had arrived soon after, emphatically denied the legitimacy of Spanish claims to the archipelago on the basis of Philip's instructions to the frontier commander. "The opinion of the religious," he states, "can be formalized in this simple syllogism: Those islands forced into submission to the

22. The classic text of Las Casas's position remains *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006. Originally published in 1542). For a selection of Las Casas's works in English, see Lawrence Clayton and David Lantigua, eds., *Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights: A Brief History With Documents* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2020).

23. On the debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda, see José Alcina Franch, "Controversia Las Casas-Sepúlveda," in *Bartolomé de las Casas: Obra Indigenista* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1985), 163–280.

Spaniards up to the present, have been made so exclusively by war. This war, from whatever angle one considers it, has been unjust. Thus, [the natives] have been unjustly forced into submission.”²⁴ Moreover, none of the three conditions of a just war, which Gayo y Aragón derived from St. Thomas Aquinas, had been met: authorization by a legitimate power, just cause for hostilities, and righteous intention.²⁵ Even to the point, Gayo y Aragón maintains, that Spaniards see themselves deprived of the universal rights granted to all peoples according to Francisco de Vitoria—the right of travel, personal safety, the right to trade and for Catholics, the right to preach the Gospel—they remain prohibited from authorizing and pursuing a just war against their perceived assailants.²⁶

Philip’s desire for a peaceful colonization extended to his instructions on the preaching of the gospel and the prospect of extending Spanish colonization to the Middle Kingdom. “The instructions of the king,” Gayo y Aragón insists, “lobbied for absolutely pacific means. Religious and colonizers alike were expected to make every effort to attract the natives to the understanding of the Catholic religion by means of love and good treatment.”²⁷ In opposition to Spanish ambitions of invading China, for instance, Philip instead followed the advice of Augustinian missionary Fr. Diego de Herrera (OSA), to send an official embassy to China with the intention of opening up commercial relations.²⁸ Regarding the collection of tribute, Gayo y Aragón emphasizes its importance as a “sign of vassalage [which] demands the enforcement of the power of jurisdiction.”²⁹ Given that Spaniards “neither administer justice, nor defend [the religious] from their enemies, nor facilitate their preaching of the Gospel,” religious ministers like Rada deemed the collection of tribute illegitimate; and would remain illegitimate unless ministers were able to establish themselves in a given territory.³⁰

24. Fr. Jesús Gayo y Aragón, *Discurso leído en la solemne apertura del curso académico 1950-1951. Tema: Ideas jurídico-teológicas de los Religiosos de Filipinas en el siglo XVI sobre la conquista de las Islas* (Manila: University of Santo Tomás Press, 1950), 18.

25. *Ibid.*, 19.

26. *Ibid.*, 23–24.

27. *Ibid.*, 28.

28. Paradoxically (again), one of the most vociferous advocates of invading China was the Jesuit priest Fr. Alonso Sánchez (SJ), whose effort was famously silenced by his superior, former provincial of the Jesuit mission in Perú Fr. José de Acosta (SJ). See Manel Ollé, *La invención de China: Percepciones y Estrategias Filipinas Respecto a China Durante el Siglo XVI* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000).

29. Fr. J. Gayo y Aragón, *Discurso leído en la solemne apertura del curso académico 1950-1951. Tema: Ideas jurídico-teológicas de los Religiosos de Filipinas en el siglo XVI sobre la conquista de las Islas*, 35.

30. *Ibid.*, 39.

The intention to put forward a legal basis of conquest, Gayo y Aragón concludes, informed the peaceful gestures of commander Legazpi in 1565, who “put in practice the instructions of his King in the discovery of the Southern Islands. Very few events could relate a similar history, even in our modern time, in which so many formalities to avoid war had been observed.”³¹ On the one hand, he admits that the religious effort to “legalize” the conquest by distinguishing conquistador abuses from the King’s instructions; and the King’s own intention to justify the legitimacy of Spain’s title to the islands by basing it on the preaching of the Gospel, had left a mixed record. But, he cautions, we also have every reason to suspect the early missionaries’ account of wanton violence to be exaggerated. And even if we choose to believe them, he pleads, can we not also admit that Legazpi exhausted every effort to make peaceful overtures with the natives of Cebu before invading the island, razing the villages, and declaring the deed justified in the eyes of the king? And anyway, should we not also blame the Portuguese for their earlier hostilities against the natives, which disposed them against the Spanish arrival? Finally, can one not justify Legazpi’s invasion of Manila on the basis of Muslim settlement there, given “the opposition of each other’s religious beliefs [and] the Muslim fear that they would lose their incipient domination and that the natives of the island [Luzon] would associate with the Spaniards in order to break with the Mohammedan subjection, especially given that the Spaniards approached them offering peace and calling them brothers”³²? Despite the flagrant violations of Philip’s instructions that took place within Legazpi’s lifetime and after his death, Gayo y Aragón encourages his readers to consider Legazpi’s actions as noble and moral guideposts for “all subsequent military expeditions [entradas] and pacifications and can be considered as the foundation for the study of these.”³³ On a larger level, the author reminds his readers that the project of a “just conquest,” however compromised or questionable, nevertheless may serve as a moral compass for a future just order.³⁴

3. From the political theology to the ideology of conquest

Phelan’s 1959 essay “Some Ideological Aspects of the Conquest of the Philippines” by contrast, while appearing to tackle the same subject, begins with a different question: how did the religious provide Spanish

31. *Ibid.*, 50.

32. *Ibid.*, 50.

33. *Ibid.*, 52.

34. *Ibid.*, 50.

king Philip II with the justification for conquest and colonial settlement? The difference is subtle but significant. The focus, in other words, lies not with the intentions of the early missionaries to influence the character and legitimacy of Spanish rule overseas, but rather the articulation of an ideology of empire under the Crown. This ideology borrowed from theological arguments, without, however, depending exclusively on Pope Alexander VI's "donation" of the newly explored lands to the Catholic monarchs for evangelization and possession of just title to them.

According to Phelan, the argument for Spanish just title to the Philippines and its primary corollary, which was the right of Spanish *encomenderos* or royal grantees to compel natives to pay tribute as payment for their (colonial) governance, did not stem originally from Philip II or his counselors but rather the early conquerors, colonists, and missionaries who arrived in the Philippines with the Legazpi expedition. Needless to say, both had motives for promoting Spanish possession. Colonists anticipated the prospects of establishing a lucrative trans-Pacific trade in Chinese silks, porcelain, and spices in exchange for silver from the mines of Potosí and Zacatecas in the Americas; *encomenderos* were eager to collect a tribute from the subject peoples whose regions were assigned to them by the king; and missionaries envisioned both the conversion of Native souls throughout the archipelago and an enduring Christian outpost in Manila for sending missionaries to the Middle Kingdom and Japan. The legal basis of the Spanish presence, then, had less to do with the moral rights and obligations of a conquest and settlement of foreign lands *per se*, than it had to do with a working formula or *modus vivendi* that would satisfy the king while dissuading foreign powers from encroaching upon Spanish territory. Both Spanish colonists and missionaries agreed that, for better or worse, they had settled in the conquered territories of the archipelago; and that they intended to stay.

Missionaries, following Vitoria's lead, argued from the beginning that colonization in theory was a legitimate endeavor. At the beginning of the essay, Phelan emphasizes this point: "The spokesmen of the Augustinian Order in the 1570s did not *actually* question the right of the Spaniards to take possession of the islands and to colonize those regions. What they vigorously denounced was the *means* by which that occupation had been executed" (*italics added*).³⁵ The problem for the colonists and missionaries

35. Phelan, "Some Ideological Aspects of the Conquest of the Philippines," 221. "[E]ven critics like Bartolomé de las Casas," Alexander Ponsen adds, "and Francisco de Vitoria, who criticized the Pope's secular authority and by extension the Spanish monarchs' initial claims to sovereign title over New World territory, did not advocate the total illegitimacy or abandonment of overseas empire. On the contrary, in critiquing specific features of Spanish

then, for Phelan at least, was twofold: 1) acknowledging and addressing the potentially *illegitimate* means by which Spaniards claimed to exercise dominion over Native subjects; 2) providing a proper, legal basis for the *future* despoliation of Native land and wealth under the mantle of Spanish sovereignty.

Between these two demands, missionaries adopted a variety of positions. One of the chief Augustinian priests whose writings Gayo y Aragón most relied on in his study regarding the theological justification of conquest, Fr. Martín de Rada (OSA), himself depended on an argument for colonization that would today be recognized as racist: “[In Rada’s view] The defects of Philippine society were such that the Spaniards were morally obligated to intervene in order to educate the natives to the higher level of Spanish civilization.”³⁶ Paradoxically, such an argument came not from the first champion of Native Indian rights Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas but his nemesis, Spanish jurist Juan Luis Ginés de Sepúlveda. Later, during the 1582 Synod or religious council of Manila, bishop (later archbishop) Domingo de Salazar (OP), himself a Dominican preacher, convened the provincials and church hierarchy to denounce the atrocities committed by the Spaniards in the name of the Crown, but also to lay down an acceptable justification of Spanish rule. To do so, the writers maintained that, just as the Pope was the vicar of Christ, so too was the Spanish Crown the vicar of the Pope in the overseas territories.³⁷ As such, it fell upon Philip to not only promote the church overseas, but also protect the natural right of Catholic preachers to preach in foreign lands:

Aunque son muchas las causas y razones porque los varones doctos han puesto siempre mucha duda en la posesión que los españoles tienen sobre las tierras de los indios, más todas se resumen en esta: de que los capitanes y soldados, gobernadores y justicias, no llevasen más derecho del que su rey les había dado, ni el rey les dio más del que él tenía recibido del papa, ni el papa le dio, ni pudo dar, a él, más de lo que él tiene de Cristo, que es el precepto y derecho de poder ir y enviar por todo el mundo a predicar el evangelio.³⁸

imperialism they sought to reshape and improve the nature of the empire in order to justify it in the eyes of God and according to natural law.” Alexander Ponsen, “From Monarchy to Empire,” in *The World of Colonial America*, ed. Ignacio Gallup-Díaz (London: Routledge, 2017), 20.

36. Phelan, “Some Ideological Aspects of the Conquest of the Philippines,” 222.

37. The Spanish Crown’s prerogative or authority over the church in the Indies was confirmed by Pope Julius II in 1508, although previous papal bulls also charged the Catholic monarchs with this office throughout the fifteenth century.

38. “Although many are the causes and reasons why learned men have cast doubt on the possession that Spaniards claim over Indian lands, all can be summarized thusly: [that] the captains and soldiers, governors and justices, do not wield any greater authority than the that which the king has bestowed on them, nor does the king than that [authority] which he has received from the Pope, nor does or can the Pope have any more [authority]

This theological justification for conquest placed a heavy emphasis on the primacy of the evangelization effort, which bishop Salazar and his successor, Fr. Miguel Benavides (OP) would continue to insist on throughout the duration of their lives. Yet its adoption would have exercised a significant limit on the king's power in the administration of Spanish rule overseas. To say that the Crown's just title to its overseas possessions owed itself to the conferral of the king's primary role as the protector and handmaiden of the Church would be to effectively return the Crown to its original conundrum: how to create a framework of justice that did not depend on papal authority or donation?

Such a check on the king's authority over dominion, moreover, would have other undesirable consequences for both the king and the overseas colonists. In general, it would give the church and missionaries the power to determine the standard by which the administration and exercise of justice would take place: whether this concerned the designation of hostile populations that required military incursions (called *entradas*, "pacifications" or simply expeditions [*jornadas*]), the collection of tribute and imposition of forced labor on these peoples, the conditions of trade and commerce between Christian and non-Christian populations, or the larger direction of Spanish rule overseas.³⁹ The overweening influence of the church in matters of secular justice can be clearly seen in the proceedings of the 1582 Synod: which, in the name of setting out the theological justification of secular rule, in fact designates the limits of secular rule under the theological mandate. *Encomenderos* and colonists felt particularly aggrieved by the religious prohibition against collecting tribute from the Native populations that had been "pacified," or had accepted the Spanish presence in the Philippines; but who did not yet have the benefit of preachers to explain to them *why* they were obliged to pay the price of Spanish peace and friendship [*paz y amistad*].

One wonders, too, whether Spanish jurists felt at least a little uneasy by the Machiavellian drift of Fathers Salazar and Sánchez's arguments to the king regarding the justice of the conquest. Clearly, the bishop and Sánchez reason, neither the conquest nor the succeeding project of religious conversion and the collection of tribute among the natives of the Philippines

than that which he has taken from Christ, who is the foundation and right behind [the Spanish Crown] going and sending those throughout the world to preach the Gospel." Fr. Domingo de Salazar, *Sínodo de Manila de 1582*, ed. José Luis Porras Camúñez, (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Históricos del Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1988), 384–385.

39. Despite the king and archbishop's strongest efforts, this is in fact how the subject populations came to be ruled. See John D. Blanco, *Counter-Hispanization in the Colonial Philippines*, 79–106.

originally came about in a lawful way. But if the greater good of peace, they argue, which facilitates the conversion of natives to the Christian faith, has taken place in the long run, does this greater good not outweigh the collateral effects, which are evil? Applying this logic to various cases, the authors specify other conditions under which Spanish rapacity and impunity, however unjust in act, nevertheless come to be *justified* in the fullness of time by the ultimate result.⁴⁰ If, for example, Spaniards found themselves in extreme need, and their survival necessitated the theft of wealth and property from Native settlements by force, they might feel pressured to steal and even kill. But if, the authors continue, “as the result of this evil there follows the original intention with the good [way], which is the pacification and conversion of the Indians, [Spaniards] should not be obliged to make restitution for what they took.”⁴¹ The authors of the Manila Synod report extend this exoneration to the military incursions or *entradas* as well as the atrocities committed by Spaniards who sought pacification in order to facilitate the preaching of the Gospel:

Decimos pues ahora, que *no por los agravios e insultos de los que acompañan a los predicadores, deja esto de ser injusto ni por ello el papa, rey, o gobernador pierden el derecho de enviar predicadores a hacer su oficio lo mejor que pudieren, y si los que los acompañan para su guarda, con sus vicios impidieren el oficio de la predicación, repréndanles las quejas y castíguenles como es razón. Y, si no se pudiere remediar todo, no por eso se debe dejar la predicación, pues no es ella mala, que, aunque suceda que el mismo predicador esté amanecido, no por eso dejará de ser verdad lo que predica.*⁴²

40. Such logic was effectively used by revolutionary leader and prime minister of Cuba Fidel Castro in his famous speech “La historia me absolverá”: see <https://web.archive.org/web/20071012230334/http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/marti-moncada/jm01.html>. Last accessed June 15, 2024.

41. Salazar, *Sínodo de Manila*, 222.

42. “We may say then, that *not by the injuries and insults committed by those who accompany the preachers would [the preaching of the Gospel] cease to be just; nor would the Pope, king, or governor lose the right of sending preachers to exercise their office as best as they can, and if those who accompany them as guards obstruct the task of evangelization with their vices, let complaints against them be reprimanded and have them punished as is fitting. And even if some matters remain unresolved, let these not prevent us from preaching [the Gospel], because it is not the preaching that is evil..., because it is not the preaching that is evil, such that, even if it should happen that the same preacher lives with a woman, not by this would his words cease to be true*” (Salazar, *Sínodo de Manila*, 222: italics added). In Fr. Alonso Sánchez (SJ)’s report to the king several years later, he repeated the same logic as a reason for recognizing the king’s legitimate sovereignty over the Philippines: “despite how bad it was initially, or even now, [the Spaniards] do not violate or nullify the reason or right enjoyed by the one who sends them, the Pope or the Kings of Spain. These do not send them for this evil purpose.... *Accidental evil that the evil minister causes does not hinder the essential benefit a good lord intends.*” Cited in Fr. Pedro Chirino and Jaime Górriz, *Historia de la provincial de Filipines de la Companyia de Jesús, 1581-1606* (Barcelona: Pòrtic, 2000), 96. It is quite possible that Fr. Sánchez was responsible for these similar words cited in the

Theologians may recognize in this the very same logic as the Machiavelian heresy (the ends justify the means), against whom Catholic theologians paradoxically waged a tireless dispute throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴³ I refer here to the argument that the agents of the church as a divinely inspired and established institution lay beyond the judgment and culpability of whatever sordid failures or moral bankruptcy they may express in the course achieving the larger goal of preaching the gospel. In the cited passage, by setting out the terms by which the restitution of wrongs committed in the act of conquest *might* take place, the authors end up *exonerating* the conquest by treating acts committed in violation of the king's authority as if those same acts had made Christian evangelization overseas and therefore Spanish authority possible.

In our time, writers as politically diverse as legal jurist and historian of law Carl Schmitt and political theorist Michael Walzer have both observed that the sanctification of conquest and war by the holiness of the cause [*justa causa*] cannot serve as the basis of modern or international law. Neither, for that matter, can the identification of "natural rights" as they appear in Vitoria, insofar as these derive their authority from an interpretation of sacred Scripture or writings belonging to a religious tradition like Christianity. Anthony Anghie has further pointed out in an essay on Francisco de Vitoria, that the latter's identification of natural rights like the right to preach among foreign peoples *jus communicationis* resulted not in the advocacy of universal peace but rather the perpetual incitement of violence and aggression amongst the aggrieved subject populations.⁴⁴ The justification of conquest based on the theory and doctrine of just war, in other words, remained a medieval conception whose authority rested principally with the church. Ultimately, "justice" would mean *whatever the church said it meant*, which is what allowed for and even encouraged the articulation of excessively convoluted and subtle arguments reconciling concepts of peace with that of war, friendship with enmity, charity with rapacity, and so forth.

Whether or not these reasons entered into Philip's mind are a matter of speculation. In either case, however, he decided to base the legitimacy of

previous Synod, as he played a paramount role as Fr. Salazar's advisor and colleague in the proceedings.

43. See Clara Iglesias-Rondina, *Maquiavelo y los Jesuitas: Una introducción (Los Anti-Maquiavelo)* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014).

44. "Vitoria's scheme finally endorses and legitimates endless incursions into Indian society... Spaniards acquire an extraordinarily powerful right of intervention and may act on behalf of the people seen as victims of Indian rituals" Anthony Anghie, "Francisco de Vitoria and the Colonial Origins of International Law," *Social and Legal Studies* 5, no. 321 (1996): 326–327.

Spanish rule *not* on theological principles but rather on the solicitation of express Native acceptance of crown sovereignty in the Philippines. In 1596, he commanded then Governor Francisco Tello to order the congregation of the Native leaders of every settlement known to the Spaniards, in order for them to listen to the reading of a quasi-feudal contract. This contract requested Native communities to express their consent to Spanish rule. Historians beginning with Phelan, of course, know that the demonstration of Native fealty to the Spanish Crown was a farce. Native chieftains from the provinces around Manila were asked to “elect the Castilian king as their natural lord and sovereign. They based their voluntary submission on the contractual promise that the king and his subjects render each other certain services.”⁴⁵ Phelan emphasizes the religious overtones of the contract, which declares one of the benefits of Spanish sovereignty to be the “liberation” of Native Filipinos from the idolatry and tyranny of their leaders.

How Native chieftains were compelled to sign such a document is not too hard to imagine. Yet, while Phelan emphasizes the premise of Native inferiority upon which this supposed “liberation” would be achieved, he omits the larger importance of the contract as the king’s attempt to wrest the justification of Spanish title as well as the administration of justice in the Philippines from the religious ministers and the church. Instead of a theology of conquest, then, Philip opted for the promotion of Christianity as one among other ideologies buttressing the just title of the Spanish Crown to its overseas territories. Underlying these ideologies, however, lay a much more lapidary agreement, in which Native Filipinos near Manila and throughout the Ilocos region had simply accepted their subjection. In the eyes of the Spanish Crown and colonial government, the successive failure of rebellions throughout the archipelago would simply reaffirm that most Natives preferred Spanish sovereignty to anything else.⁴⁶

As an epilogue to this remarkable episode, Native response to the contract was decidedly mixed: many Native chiefs either refused to sign or requested a year to deliberate whether or not they would commit themselves to the Spanish Crown.⁴⁷ Governor Tello includes in the same document a complaint against the strict enforcement of the royal decree to solicit

45. Phelan, “Some Ideological Aspects of the Conquest of the Philippines,” 238.

46. See Mawson’s recent work, *Incomplete Conquests*; and Blanco, *Counter-Hispanization*, 49–78.

47. “In the province of Ylocos,” Governor Francisco Tello wrote in 1597, “this was very well done; and submission was rendered to your Majesty. Likewise, the whole district of Manila... has rendered submission. La Laguna... has not so easily yielded... as it was of so great importance they sought for a delay.” Cited in Emma Blair and James Robertson, eds., *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898*, v. 10 (Cleveland: Arthur Clarke Company, 1906), 175–200 *passim*.

consent from the subject populations: “if the effect of this royal decree must continue and be in operation as provided therein, there will be many difficulties such as have already commenced with the seeking of delay.” No further word of this ceremony of consent appears, although in Fr. Gayo y Aragón’s later essay, “The Controversy over Justification of Spanish Rule in the Philippines,” the author seems supremely (and quite unjustifiably) confident that Native consent to Spanish rule followed everywhere soon after.⁴⁸ On the basis of the leaders belonging to two regions in Luzon, the island upon which the Spaniards had established Manila, the just title of Spanish sovereignty was proclaimed a *fait accompli*.

4. The road to hell paved with good intentions

With the theological influence on Philip’s just title to the Philippines minimized, one may reasonably ask what ultimately accounted for the friars’ excessive influence over temporal as well as spiritual matters in the gestation of colonial society? The answer lies, in part, with the success with which the religious Orders succeeded in establishing a de facto theocracy over the mission territories, which they defended by maintaining the ambiguity of legal jurisdiction within these territories.⁴⁹ To begin with, they benefited from Philip’s 1574 Ordinances, which restricted colonists from living outside Spanish settlements: the latter which were reduced to eight Spanish *villas*.⁵⁰ This meant that, in virtually every major Native settlement or *cabecera*, the (Spanish) friar or Jesuit priest was the only Spaniard allowed to live there.⁵¹ Native chiefs were charged with collecting the tribute for the *encomenderos* to whom these settlements were assigned.⁵² Members of this refunctionalized elite were given certain privileges in exchange for

48. “In due time,” Gayo y Aragón writes, “it can be surmised, nearly all the other regions and provinces of the Philippines gave their free consent to the supreme authority over them of the King of Spain.... Irrespective of whether such procedure was followed by the Spanish authorities in every instance and in all parts of the Philippines, the overall general picture is undeniably favorable (!).” See Fr. J. Gayo y Aragón, “The Controversy over Justification of Spanish Rule in the Philippines,” in *Studies in Philippine Church History*, ed. Gerald Anderson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 20–21.

49. For a more comprehensive treatment of this question, see Blanco, *Counter-Hispanization in the Colonial Philippines*, 79–106.

50. See Luciano Santiago, “Pomp, Pageantry, and Gold: Eight Spanish Villas in the Philippines (1565-1887),” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 33, no. 1–2 (March/June 2005): 57–75.

51. See Daniel Doeppers, “The Development of Philippine Cities Before 1900,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 31, no. 4 (1972): 776.

52. Luis Ángel Sánchez Gómez, “Las élites nativas y la construcción colonial de Filipinas [1565-1789],” in L. Cabrero, ed., *España y el Pacífico. Legazpi* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2004), 37–70, 49–53.

collecting tribute as well as providing the requisite number of young able-bodied men to work in the colonial shipyards, suppress rebellions in neighboring areas, build forts and churches, and otherwise provide a labor quota for colonial governance. The friars (including the Jesuits), in turn, provided spiritual teaching in preparation for baptism and the administration of sacraments for the Christian(izing) community. And after a period of ten years, missionaries were expected to vacate these mission settlements and proselytize further afield, while their *doctrinas* (the name for settlements undergoing Christianization) would be converted into curates or parishes to be administered by ordained priests under the ecclesiastical hierarchy of bishops.⁵³

But the missionaries rarely left. Their intransigence before the Spanish Crown and official church constitutes a second aspect of religious influence in the Philippines, and represented yet another legal anomaly of Spanish colonial rule between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries: namely, the absence of enforceable law in the religious provinces due mainly to the refusal of the religious Orders to recognize or obey either Crown or church authority. For in response to any attempts by the archbishop to replace the missionary (also called regular clergy) with secular priests, or even conduct any kind of official visitation and inspection of these mission churches, the religious Orders claimed that, as missionaries, they were not answerable to civil or Canon law, but rather and exclusively to the rule of their respective Order(s). A brief account of friar and Jesuit intransigence will help us understand how, despite Spanish king Philip's success in avoiding a "theology of conquest," the form of government that evolved over the course of three centuries for most colonial subjects was theocratic or "monachocratic," that is, monk rule.

Beginning with the conquest of Mexico in 1521, Pope Adrian VI had empowered members of the religious Orders or regular clergy with the authority of acting as ordained ministers overseas; without, however, their having undergone any process of examination or approval to exercise such faculties. As monks, these members recognized and reported not to the ecclesiastical hierarchy of bishops, but rather the provincial superiors of their particular Order; who, in turn, reported to the chief provincial or director in Rome. As ministers, they enjoyed the privilege of immunity from civil laws, insofar as these would inevitably conflict with their obligations to the church. Yet as members of the religious Orders specifically, regular clergy could argue they were *also* immune to Canon laws, which

53. See Onofre D. Corpuz, *Roots of the Filipino Nation* v. 1 (Quezon City, Manila: University of Philippines Press, 2005), 187–195.

applied to ordained or secular clergy.⁵⁴ The ability to act as ordained priests without being subject to either civil or Canon laws gave them near absolute immunity before the Crown and official church alike. Moreover, their lone presence in most Native settlements all but guaranteed their near total authority in these pueblos as representatives of Spanish rule.

When pressured by the archbishop to acknowledge the authority of the official church by allowing the archbishop to inspect the records of the mission pueblos, conduct official inspections, and convert mission parishes into curacies staffed by qualified ordained priests, the Orders banded together and threatened to abandon their missions *en masse*. In 1698, archbishop Camacho related the resulting threat of a “friar strike” under a secret agreement or *Concordia* among the Orders, which threatened to give free rein to the endemic (native) popular resistance to Spanish rule:

hizieron pues, Señor, vna concordia de juntar todas fus fuerzas, que fon bien exceffivas; para que á qualquier movimiento de el Prelado Diocefano, aunque fea en execueión de fu obligación/ y contra qualquier punto particular, que toque á vna Religión, fúeffe la Caufa comun de todas é igualmente defendida por vnas, y por otras, yèndo con el fupuefto, de que no aviendo Clérigos, y teniendo ellos todos los Beneficios del Arcobifpado, y Obispados, la neceffidad avia de precifar á que los efectos de las operaciones de los Diocefanos avian de fer a medida de fu arbitrio atándoles con efto las manos, y libertad para exercicio del cargo Paftoral; á cuya vnión dan nombre de concordia, fiendo el legitimo el de coligación, para dejar de obedecer, tanto à V. Mag. quanto al Àrcobifpo y Obifpos en aquéllos cafos, y términos prevenidos por derecho.⁵⁵

Not only did the resulting standoff prevent the archbishop from exercising his duties, Camacho protested, but also prevented him from addressing the many allegations against the religious ministers, ranging from “the violations of tariffs, excessive taxation for [Christian] burials, contributions, bribes, forced labor, and personal services, from which arise the ceaseless

54. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

55. “And so, my Lord, [the religious Orders] made an agreement amongst them [Concordia], to unite their forces, which are indeed excessive; so that, in response to any movement or any particular matter on the part of the Diocesan prelate that would affect any one Order, even it were only to execute [my] obligation, the Orders would make common cause to defend one another equally, following the assumption that, given the absence of secular clergy, and with the Orders enjoying all the Benefices of the Archbishop and bishoprics, the necessity would come down to the effects of the Diocese’s plans ultimately depending on [the religious Orders’] arbitrary will, effectively tying our hands, and [leaving them at] liberty to exercise their pastoral duties: and for this complot they give the name *Concordia*, this being the term of their collusion, to avoid obeying Your Majesty by defying the Archbishop and Bishops in those cases and terms prescribed by law.” Fr. Diego Camacho y Ávila, “Expression de el hecho y manifestacion de el derecho con que el Doctor D. Diego Camacho, y Avilla...defendió su Jurisdiccion y dignidad,” 39–40.

cries and clamors of the Natives in their misery.”⁵⁶ From Camacho’s gripping account, one gathers that no hospital, hacienda, workshop or marketplace was free from friar and Jesuit corruption. In this way, the religious Orders exploited the unique role of the mission as “frontier institution” in order to maintain the *frontier condition* of most areas of the archipelago. This condition, which was characterized by the absence of civil jurisdiction or at least the impossibility of its enforcement, allowed participants in the Concordia to create an *imperium in imperio*.

When confronted with friar and Jesuit ownership of lands the Crown had originally designated as common lands for Native agriculture, the Orders refused to submit the property titles. The avowed pretext behind this refusal was that any acknowledgment of ecclesiastical authority would undermine the root of friars’ *coligación*, collusion. The underlying reason, of course, had to do with the fact that the friar and Jesuit (claim to) ownership over Native common lands was a violation of civil law.⁵⁷ With the intention of privileging the spread of Christianity, Spain had unleashed a frontier anarchy overseas, where laws were ceaselessly passed but could not be effectively applied. The sanctity of friar immunity from civil and Canon laws achieved the very thing that king Philip had sought to avoid: the de-legitimation of Spanish rule in favor of a de facto theocracy in the Philippines. The fact that historians are only beginning to revisit the sordid history of the religious Orders in the Philippines is testament to the efforts with which these same Orders sought to disguise this history as one of spiritual conquest.⁵⁸

5. Christianity as colonial legacy

Telescoping forward four centuries, the study of religious influence in the justification of Spanish title in the Philippines adumbrates a question that occupied the architects of a post-colonial, nationalist vision of Philippine

56. “los quebrantamientos de aranzales, exceffibos Derechos de entierros, contribuciones, derramas, y repartimientos, y fervicios perfonales, de que fe originan los continuos fuspiros, y clamores de los Naturales en su miseria.” *Ibid.*, 43. Many of these accusations against the religious had been recorded from the beginning of the seventeenth century by colonial officials, governors, and archbishops alike.

57. Fernando Palanco, “The Tagalog Revolts of 1745 According to Spanish Primary Sources,” *Philippine Studies* 58, no. 1–2 (June 2010): 65–67. As Palanco observes, the Jesuits agreed to submit records, but with the understanding that they did so as a favor to the Crown and not by obligation.

58. See the recent book by Stephanie Joy Mawson, *Incomplete Conquests*, which mounts a compelling argument for a drastic revision of Philippine history, beginning with the limits of Spanish rule in most parts of the archipelago. Stephanie Joy Mawson, *Incomplete Conquests: The Limits of Spanish Empire in the Seventeenth-Century Philippines* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

cultural identity: to what degree was the Catholic religion itself inseparable from a colonial mentality that was ceaselessly reproduced within Spain's most enduring colonial institution, i.e. the Church? I suspect the Gayo y Aragón-Phelan debate emerged in the age of decolonization because Christianity remained the most significant, yet also the most ambiguous, colonial legacy in a country struggling to write its postcolonial future. On one level, it would seem common sense that the 1946 declaration of Philippine independence from the US would incentivize the production or revision of histories regarding the nation's origins; and highlight the role that conquered or colonized subjects played in envisioning a future of self-determination and republican democracy. It stands to reason, too, that such histories would also highlight the connections that the Philippines shared with a larger humanity. Between these two observations, however, the challenge put forth by Dr. José Rizal and his fellow propagandists at the end of the nineteenth century regarding the "social cancer" that had stemmed from monk rule in the Philippines had yet to be fully answered by the statesmen who were now in a position to elevate him to the status of national martyr. With the outbreak of World War II, if not before, Filipinos had already begun learning how to forget the disastrous effects of monachocracy at the heart of the colonial legacy: to the degree that figures like bishop Salazar and Fr. Alonso Sánchez could earn a new reputation as would-be liberators and founders of international, human rights; and religious instruction continued to be mandatory in all schools. As Renato Constantino acutely observed, by the 1950s even Rizal came to signify less the spirit of resistance to colonial rule and its legacies, and more an advocate of the status quo:

Part and parcel of this attempt to use Rizal as an authority to defend the status quo is the desire of some quarters to expunge from the Rizalist legacy the so-called controversial aspects of his writings, particularly his views on the friars and on religion. We have but to recall the resistance to the Rizal Bill, the use of expurgated versions of the *Noli Me Tangere* and the *El Filibusterismo*, and objections to the reading of his other writings to realize that while many would have us venerate Rizal, they would want us to venerate a homogenized version.⁵⁹

The contributions of Gayo y Aragón and Phelan to this dilemma set out to clarify what specific role Catholic theology played in the conquest: was it complicit in the rapacity and carnage unleashed on Native Filipinos following Commander Legazpi's arrival? Did it justify the Spanish king's

59. Renato Constantino, "Veneration Without Understanding," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 1, no. 4 (1972): 3-18.

title to lands and people, who then spent the succeeding three centuries rebelling against Spanish rule; or fleeing to spaces free of their subjection to the yoke of colonial institutions and Christianity? Did Catholic theology exonerate the atrocities that were committed, in effect sanctioning impunity?

In their effort to answer this question, however, both Gayo y Aragón and Phelan ignored the degree to which the religious Orders came to exercise dominion without recourse to theology—or more specifically, through the exceptions and loopholes where theology was silent, beginning with the supposed expediciencies necessary for the pastoral care of Indians. The colonial legacy, in other words, rests not with the question of Catholic *theology* but the conditions that allowed for a de facto *theocracy* to grow like a social cancer between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. A larger investigation would include an account of the oppressive conditions that natives suffered under the rule of the mission pueblos. But in this respect, the mission in the Philippines was no different than anywhere else.⁶⁰

On a larger level, until scholars can come to grips with the fact that the “spiritual conquest” of the Philippines was inseparably alloyed to and complicit with the act of conquest, oppression, and legal impunity for acts that would be considered to be heinous crimes everywhere today, the prospect of a postcolonial or decolonial theology would seem to me a mere disavowal and extension of the hypocrisy that yoked Christianity with colonial rule in the first place.

60. In Carey McWilliams’ history of southern California, he characterizes the chain of missions on the California coast as “a series of picturesque charnel houses. For it was the Mission experience, rather than any contact with Spanish culture, that produced this frightful toll of Indian life.” Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1973), 29.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS AN ECCLESIAL DECOLONIZATION OF THEOLOGY/CANON LAW: PERSPECTIVE FROM A FEMALE AFRICAN CANON LAWYER

Mary Jane Aririguzo, IHM

Introduction

This paper presents Canon law as a discipline rooted in theology. Theology is concerned with God's revelation of Himself and the church's teachings, as laid out in the official magisterial teachings of the church.¹ On the other hand, Canon law is the legal system of the Catholic Church. It consists of the rules that governs, orders and disciplines the Catholic Church. Canon law governs the church's external order, as well as the public life of the faith community. They present norms of conduct rather than the content of faith, and they contain guidelines for actions rather than beliefs.

Theology precedes law. However, law, especially Canon law, does not emerge *ex nihilo* (from nothing) nor does it exist apart from its religious and cultural underpinnings. This inquiry is prompted by both historical events and contemporary reflections; that is, by facts and theories. There is a close relationship between the two fields of study even though Canon law is not strictly a theological sub-discipline. The two disciplines are couched in two different types of language: The theological discourse is in the indicative mood; canonical norms are in the imperative mood. Theology is composed of affirmative judgments; it speaks of what is. Theology conveys knowledge acquired either through revelation or reflection on the revealed data. It speaks of God's mighty deeds in history and of our own human response to them. When the discourse is concluded, no order is issued. Canonical enactments are in the imperative mood; they speak of what ought to be. They convey a specific command, coming from an ecclesiastical (that is, human) authority and demanding action. This is true even when seemingly they are plain affirmations of rights and

1. John Macquarrie, "Systematic Theology," in *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology: Revised Edition*, ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 492.

duties: in the context the only purpose of the indication of those rights and duties is to impose on all a behavior that will respect them.

Even though Canon law is not theology, the two are inextricably linked. In what follows I have argued that decolonizing theology and laws of the church could be accomplished through inculturation, which is the means by which the good news is delivered and received in various cultures while preserving its intrinsic values. As a result, how can the laws of the church be decolonized or inculturated in their respective contexts?

1. Decolonization

For the original description of decolonization, we first need to know what colonialism is. Colonialism is when one power takes over a people or area and enforces its culture and values. After centuries of colonization, the colonizer's dominant values, practices, laws, culture, and more often remain in place. In this context, decolonizing is about, "deconstructing or dismantling colonial ideologies and challenging the superiority of colonizer's thought and approaches."² It digs into thought patterns, biases, policies, values, and more.

Decolonization of African theology is not only a project to be undertaken by the former colonies; just as feminist thinking is not only for women. The absolute complexity of mother tongues and their histories in Africa make such a model of decolonization a long process. A decolonized African theology must be rooted in the African way of life. It must come from below, not from above.

2. Relationship between theology and Canon law

Catholic theology generally maintains that God (or the transcendent/supernatural realm) furnished the basis for moral absolutes, rationality, human dignity, and truth. This was expressed by the noted Christian theologian Anselm (b. AD 1033), who said, "I believe that I may understand" (*credo ut intelligam*). He spoke of a "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*). That is, the starting point for knowledge and wisdom was *God*, who provided the lens through which one could properly interpret reality and human experience. By having faith in God, the world could be rightly understood.

2. Pushpa Iyer, "Do Not Colonize Decolonization," *The Peace Chronicle* (Summer 2020), <https://www.peacejusticestudies.org/chronicle/do-not-colonize-decolonization/> (Accessed on 27/6/2025).

Canon law is how the church organizes and governs herself. The word “canon” basically means rule. Canon law could be described as faith expressed in action. Canon law deals with the issues that any legal system does including rights, property issues, procedures, administration, personnel, crimes, and trials. It also does some things that civil law cannot, such as laws regarding sacraments, sacred places and magisterial teachings.

There is a relationship between theology and Canon law and this is obvious in the New Testament, where we see procedures for replacing an apostle (see Acts 1:15-26); also, what to do when there are disputes in the church (Matt 18:15-20). As time went on there were various councils that legislated on issues of concern. Popes would issue decretals to settle disputes or enforce discipline. Courts were established to hear cases and issue decisions. In addition, they used procedures adapted from Roman law.

Canon law is not theology, but there is a strong connection between the two. They are related and are not exclusive of each other. In fact, while faith seeks understanding in theology, in Canon law, the same faith seeks concrete practice and decision.³ Canon law does not originate from nothing or exist apart from its theological and ethical underpinnings; “Theology comes before law.” The Second Vatican Council’s teachings are thereby translated into the present canonical, legal words in the Code of Canon Law (*CIC*). In fact, in a way, this Code might be considered as a major effort to put the conciliar ecclesiological teachings into canonical language, as St. John Paul II said in reference to the 1983 Code of Canon Law.⁴ Indeed, the Holy Father, when he promulgated the Code of Canon Law in 1983, described its purpose that the Code:

...is not to substitute for faith, grace, charisms, and especially charity in the life of the Church or of the Christian faithful. On the contrary, its very purpose is to create an order in the ecclesial society so that, while giving priority to love, grace and charism, their ordered development is facilitated in the life of the ecclesial society as well as in the lives of the individuals who belong to it.⁵

The ultimate salvation of its members, their reconciliation with God, and communion with him are the spiritual goals of the church’s law. Hence the traditional canonical adage: “The salvation of souls is the supreme law” (*salus animarum suprema lex*, cf. canon 1752).

This succinct explanation of the connection between theology and Canon law tries to convey the idea that decolonization is a shared endeavor.

3. Jude Asanbe, “Collaborative Ministry: Theologians and Canonists at the Service of the Church,” *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 21 (June 2007): 57.

4. John Paul II, *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, Apostolic Constitution, January 25, 1983 in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 75, no. 2 (1983).

5. John Paul II, *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*.

Canon lawyers and theologians require each other. Collaboration between the two fields is essential for decolonization to be successful and efficient.

3. Culture—inculturation—the church

There is one critical strain of theological logic in this history of colonialism and imperialism, one that is and remains integral to the history of conversion. Each time the Gospel is proclaimed, it confronts the receiving culture, and raises questions about its compatibility, adaptability, and receptivity. That is why in all cases of evangelization, the enduring problem has always been how to make cultures compatible with, adaptable to and receptive of the message of Jesus Christ.⁶ The message of Christ usually meets with resistance, when it breaks into a culture, perhaps because it is believed to be introducing values that would upset the status quo. The degree of resistance differs however from culture to culture. Cultures like those of the Greeks, Romans, Westerners and Orientals, Africans, and Americans initially resisted the message of Christ, but later received it after they had duly insulated themselves against the harsh demands of the Gospel.

Since the early periods of the previous century, the church has become increasingly conscious of the limitations of some of her inherited methods of evangelization. She has been distancing herself, for instance, from such methods that fan the flame of nationalism and cultural imperialism, and has become more sensitive to the fact that the message of Christ should be allowed to encounter every culture with the expectation of a mutual enrichment. She was getting awake to the shift from the era of monolithic culture to the period of cultural pluralism. This fact was first expressed in 1939 by Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*: addressing the missionaries, he said:

Whatever there is in the native customs that is not inseparably bound up with superstition and error will always receive kindly consideration and, when possible, will be preserved intact.⁷

Twelve years later, he renewed his injunction, in *Evangelii Praecones*:

...let not the Gospel on being introduced into any new land destroy or extinguish whatever its people possess that is naturally good, just or beautiful.⁸

6. H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (Philadelphia: Harper, 1951), 1–45.

7. Pope Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 31 (1939), 429; see also his *Evangelii Praecones*, no. 46.

8. Pius XII, *Evangelii Praecones*, no. 56.

Much later Pope John XXIII told the *Second International Congress of Negro Artists and Writers* that

Whenever there are authentic values of art and science that can enrich the human family, the church is ready to favour such efforts of the spirit. She, as you know, does not identify herself with any particular culture, not even with Western culture to which her history is so closely bound.... The church is ever ready to recognize, to welcome and indeed to encourage all things that honour the human mind and heart.⁹

What Popes Pius XII and John XXIII initiated in these passages was further articulated by the Second Vatican Council, which, in the Spirit of *Aggiornamento*, gave a massive support to the use of “the abilities, the resources, and the customs of peoples” for the proclamation of the Gospel.¹⁰ The Council Fathers encouraged therefore liturgical reforms, ranging from the adoption of local languages and symbols to the formation of prayers and rites in the light of the local traditions.¹¹ They warned however against the danger of syncretism,¹² which could increase because of openness to cultures.

We have to acknowledge that there is no value orientation that did not originate from specific cultures. This is true, and to assert that a specific representation of value orientations is the only one that matters is to advance a hegemonic ideology. As a result, it is a type of colonialism since it fosters a perspective on indigence of being, which the Cameroonian theologian Engelbert Mveng described as “anthropological poverty.” Mveng observes astutely that “identity, dignity, freedom, history, language, faith universe, and basic creativity” of the colonized people are denied by the hegemonic system.¹³ To overcome the anthropological poverty that pervades all aspects of colonized peoples and their descendants, we must decolonize the value orientation structures that were handed down to them by those who brought them those value orientation structures.

This is why the missionary church is constantly decontextualizing and inculturating (which implies decolonization in postcolonial contexts). The church is missionary by her nature and mandate, and must encounter

9. Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *The Church Teaches: Stand of the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria on Issues of Faith and Life*, ed. Peter Schineller (Abuja, Nigeria: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Gaudium et Spes Institute, 2003), 116.

10. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, no. 13.

11. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 37–40.

12. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, no. 22.

13. Engelbert Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World,” in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 56.

people of different cultures in her works of evangelization.¹⁴ The Second Vatican Council introduced the term of Inculturation.¹⁵

Inculturation, a term introduced by the Second Vatican Council¹⁶ is the “implantation of Christianity into different human cultures.”¹⁷ According to Schineller: “Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remarking it so as to bring about a new creation.”¹⁸ It is the process of bringing the Gospel home to the people. Robert T. Mwaungulu notes that:

As through the incarnation, Christ took our human nature, and had to grow up in the Jewish cultural context, in like manner ecclesial laws, liturgy, theological expressions are compelled to follow certain social-cultural patterns of thinking, concepts and images based upon a people’s values, world view and philosophy.¹⁹

He refers that this is so “because their (African) cultural heritage and social conditions are so different from the European, Greco-Roman culture which historically has had a substantial role in shaping the present state of the church.”²⁰

During his second visit to Nigeria in 1999, Pope St. John Paul II challenged the church in Nigeria “to ensure that inculturation is offered its normal position in evangelization.”²¹ Thus, he urged the bishops to do all they can in liturgy, theology, and administration, “so that your people will feel more and more at home in the Church and the Church more and more at home in your people.”²² Inculturation that will be intelligible within the believing community must “pay attention to the rule of faith, the Christian doctrines and the important connectivity between the local and the universal church.”²³

14. Matt 28:18-20; cf. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, no. 35; *CIC*, canon 781.

15. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964; and in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 57 (1965), 17.

16. *Ibid.*, 17.

17. Thomas Pazhayampallil, *Pastoral Guide: Moral, Canonical, Liturgical*, 4th edition, vol. 2 (KJC: Bangalore, 2012), no. 455.

18. Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 6.

19. Robert T. Mwaungulu, “Possibilities of Inculturating,” *Concilium* 5 (1996), 81.

20. Mwaungulu, “Possibilities of Inculturating,” 81.

21. Paulinus Chibuikwe Nwaigwe, *Canonical Marriage Preparation in the Igbo Tradition in the Light of Canon 1063 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law: Canonical Norms and Inculturation*, African Theological Studies 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), 327.

22. *Ibid.*, 327.

23. *Ibid.*, 326.

Recently, Pope Francis gave an explanation of inculturation as follows: “The ultimate aim should be that the Gospel, as preached in categories proper to each culture, will create a new synthesis with that particular culture.”²⁴

The General Directory for Catechesis, clearly uses the term “inculturation” and specifies each of the tasks associated with inculturation as follows:²⁵

- To know in depth the culture of persons and the extent of its penetration into their lives;
- To recognize a cultural dimension in the Gospel itself, while affirming, on the one hand, that this does not spring from some human cultural humus, and recognizing, on the other, that the Gospel cannot be isolated from the cultures in which it was initially inserted and in which it has found expression through the centuries;
- To proclaim the profound change, the conversion, which the Gospel, as a “transforming and regenerating” force works in culture;
- To witness to the transcendence and the non-exhaustion of the Gospel with regard to culture, while at the same time discerning those seeds of the Gospel which may be present in culture;
- To promote a new expression of the Gospel in accordance with evangelized culture, looking to a language of the faith which is the common patrimony of the faithful and thus a fundamental element of communion;
- To maintain integrally the content of the faith and ensure that the doctrinal formulations of tradition are explained and illustrated, while taking into account the cultural and historical circumstances of those being instructed, and to avoid defacing or falsifying the contents.

4. African considerations for inculturation and possibilities in Canon law

Each local church must define the heart of their value orientations that are appropriate for the manifestation of the faith if it is necessary for the People of God to inculcate in all ramifications. There is one thing that Africans have in common with all cultures. *Communitas* is an essential and generic human bond that develops in the participants a deep sense

24. Pope Francis, *Adhortatio Apostolica: Evangelii Gaudium*, Nov 24, 2013; also in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 105 (2013), 1119–1137, no. 129.

25. Congregation for the Clergy, General Directory for Catechesis, August 15, 1997 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 203.

of obligation and responsibility for the solidarity of the community.²⁶ The African worldview expresses the reality of *communitas* as communalism. Andrew A. Moemeka provides the pathway to the African cultural world by affirming communalism as the root paradigm of African cultures and the way Africans communicate. He identifies as its main ethos/values: supremacy of community, sanctity of authority, respect for old age, worth of the individual and religion as a way of life.²⁷ These three could further be incorporated under the headings of: a) supremacy of community, comprising sanctity of authority and respect for old age; b) usefulness of the individual; and c) religion as a way of life. These form the moral values that underscore African norms and customary laws.

5. Specific proposals for decolonization and inculturation in the 1983 Code of Canon Law

As was already mentioned, the church must interact with people from all cultural backgrounds in order to fulfill her mission to evangelize the world (Matt 28:18–20; cf. AG 35; can. 781). There is, therefore, a close link between the church's law and her mission. The strength of the law is founded on her mission and as organization. In March 2002, Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, as Prefect for the Evangelization of Peoples affirmed, in *Lectio Magistralis*, that the entire laws of the church have a missionary dimension, in as much as they were born from her missionary activity.²⁸ And precisely because of this, the church is equally affected by the culture of the time and place in which the evangelization activity is carried out. The church is therefore aware of the fact that in carrying out her works of evangelization, she is indebted to the culture of the world and to the missionary territory to which she is invited.²⁹ Thus, she needs the language of the place, an indispensable instrument both for the faith and the culture, even for the creation of her own juridical order.

Even though the 1983 Code does not use the word “inculturation,” it is implicit in the Code. Burkhard Joseph Berkmann highlights the relationship between Canon law and culture viewed from different angles.

26. Cf. Joseph Oladejo Fániran, *Foundations of African Communication with Examples from Yoruba Culture* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2008), 22–32.

27. Cf. Andrew A. Moemeka, “Communalism as a fundamental dimension of culture,” *Journal of Communication* 48, no. 4 (1998): 128–133, quoted in Joseph Oladejo Fániran, *Foundations of African Communication* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 2008), 48.

28. C. Sepe, *Lectio Magistralis*, March 11, 2002, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, quoted in Velasio de Paolis, “Per una inculturazione del diritto canonico,” *Euntes Docete* 56 (2003): 6.

29. Cf. de Paolis, “Per una inculturazione del diritto canonico,” 6.

He notes that the Roman Catholic Church is not restricted to any specific culture, but that because the Catholic Church is open to all cultures and transcends boundaries, the cultures in turn affect the church's legal system. The church "has to implement the principle of subsidiarity in order for local specificities to be taken into consideration."³⁰ In all, the church intends the various cultures of people to be respected and acknowledged while evangelizing them, distinguishing what is in line with the gospel from what is not. Burkhard takes his time to articulate the implications of inculturation in Canon law. He identifies some canons in both codes of Canon law, which refer to inculturation.

- i) Canon 787 §1 *CIC* 1983 emphasizes that those not believing in Christ should be enabled to understand the message of the Gospel, in a way that is appropriate to their own temperament and culture.
- ii) A programme of inculturation is to be found in can. 584 §2 CCEO 1990 (Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches) which states: "The evangelization of the nations should be so done that, preserving the integrity of faith and morals, the Gospel can be expressed in the culture of individual peoples; namely, in catechetics, their own liturgical rites, in sacred art, in particular law, and, in short, the whole ecclesial life."
- iii) Canon 592 §1 CCEO 1990 states: "In missionary territories particular care has to be taken to promote forms of apostolate for the lay persons; to promote institutes of consecrated life through methods suited to their characteristics and culture."
- iv) Also, canon 584 §2 of the CCEO 1990 clearly stipulates that the Canon law itself is also an expression of inculturation. This is the case, when the particular law takes into account local and regional customs.³¹

These canons refer to organs through which the values of cultures could be incorporated into the legal system of the church.

Vincenzo Mosca equally specifies Particular Law as the ideal location for the inculturation of Canon law. He notes that since the promulgation of the *CIC* 1983, in the praxis of the church in the light of a theology of inculturation, there are particular organs, institutions and offices that "can" and "must" increase their role of creativity in producing particular norms incarnated in the cultures, to the places, to the situations and to the groups of people who are living in the church. These are the Episcopal

30. Guidelines for the revision of the Code of Canon Law 5 in *Communicationes* 1 (1969): 78, quoted in B. J. Berkmann, "Inculturation and evangelization in the Catholic canon law," *Revista Crítica de Derecho Canónico Pluriconfesional* 3 (2016): 30–31.

31. Burkhard Joseph Berkmann, "Inculturation and evangelization in the Catholic canon law," *Kritische Zeitschrift für überkonfessionelles Kirchenrecht* 3 (2016): 31.

Conferences, the diocesan bishops and the other local ordinaries in their districts, the various groups of people (associations and movements) and, in particular, the institutes of consecrated life and the societies of apostolic life on the basis of a just autonomy of life and of government.³²

5.1 *Episcopal conferences*

The 1983 Code assigns the Episcopal Conferences the task of legislating on various matters. Canon 447, defining the institutional reality of the Episcopal Conferences, affirms the purpose of adaptation-inculturation of the universal norm to concrete situations. They are called to develop “certain pastoral functions for the Christian faithful of their territory, in order to promote the greater good, which the church offers to humanity, especially through forms and programs of the apostolate adapted to the circumstances of time and place, according to the norm of law.”

5.2 *Diocesan bishops and other local ordinaries*

Some canons of the 1983 Code with regards to the legislative power of the diocesan bishop, entrust them with the determination of various disciplinary points, creating a real particular law of the dioceses. It is evident that the clarity of the power of governance of the diocesan bishop is clearer in the 1983 Code than in the 1917 Code.

There are at the level of the dioceses, the episcopal council, college of advisers, priests’ council, council for economic affairs, pastoral council, and at the level of the parish, the pastoral council and council for economic affairs, which are the organs of co-responsibility and participation that the 1983 Code provides for the various forms of particular church, distinguished on the basis of grade of representation and field of competence. Equally, there is the diocesan synod (canons 460–468), whereby all the people of God are involved and are subjects of pastoral directives and provisions. When the system is functional, it is possible to arrive at the incarnation of canonical norms in the variety of local situations. In any case, the diocesan bishop remains the sole legislator (canon 466 *CIC* 1983).

5.3 *Institutes of consecrated life and other communal forms*

The institutes of consecrated life and the societies of apostolic life are organs that express their autonomy of discipline, of life and of government.

32. Cf. Vincenzo Mosca, “For an Inculturation of Canon Law,” *Concilium*, English edition, 5 (2016): 105.

Following in this tradition, the current legislation, faithful to the principle of respecting as much as possible the autonomy of each institute, based on patrimony or charisma (cf. canon 578) of each, has given rather elastic norms. As for the respective statutes, the *CIC* 1983 insists on a certain harmonization of the spiritual elements with the juridical elements, so that a purely exhortative text is not compiled nor a combination of laws without identity and that norms do not needlessly proliferate.

The 1994 synod on consecrated life called attention to the importance of inculturating the charisma of consecrated life. The charisma of each institute, exemplified in the past in European-Western culture, has been able to spread out to other cultures. Also, the various communal forms of the church which range from simple associations, third orders and confraternities, to the great phenomenon of church movements, and also the new forms of consecrated life (canon 605) form part of the group. Their statutes and regulations are an expression of a vitality and creativity of the law of the church. There are also distinguished the lay and spiritual movements from those of the church.

Mwaungulu prays that more legislative competence be granted to the Conferences of Bishops (cf. canon 455) and diocesan bishops within their jurisdiction than that which is present in the 1983 Code of Canon law.³³ He lists some areas of concern with regard to the theme of inculturating ecclesial law for the church in Africa as follows:

the law of marriage, an institution that has extensive and significant social ramifications ... the question of the description of marriage consent laws, pertaining to marriage tribunals, annulment procedures, invalid marriages and admittance to Holy Communion, the local church's participation in the Bishop-selection process, etc.³⁴

Mwaungulu gives some illustrative examples of how some local churches in Africa have wrongly or correctly interpreted some ecclesial laws by way of inculturation:³⁵

- a) The law on admittance or denial of Christian burial. Canons 1177, 1183, 213 (530, 5) clearly enunciate the right of Catholics to a Christian burial, and those who are to be denied are specifically mentioned in canon 1184. In some church communities in ... African countries, the right to Christian burial is unduly denied to some Christians. The conditions for admitting one to Christian burial are made more

33. Mwaungulu, "Possibilities of Inculturating," 82.

34. Mwaungulu, "Possibilities of Inculturating," 82.

35. Mwaungulu, "Possibilities of Inculturating," 84-85.

stringer than the universal law. For instance, persons in irregular marriages, the divorced and remarried, those who do not support the church by paying the prescribed church tax, those with a low church attendance would be denied full Christian burial. This is done without any check if the deceased had shown signs of repentance before death (canon 1184, 1) or without heeding canon 18, which states that laws which restrict rights should be interpreted strictly. Denial of Christian burial to less fervent Catholics is used as a catechizing tool to help members of Christian communities to take seriously their Christian obligations and to bring them to conversion.

- b) Laws on infant baptism: for the licit baptism of an infant, Canon 868, §§1, 2, prescribes that there be well-founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion; and baptism is to be put off if such hope is altogether lacking. In some church communities (in Africa), infant baptism is at times postponed, even if well-founded hope for the education of the infant is not altogether lacking for reasons such as parents, or parents are lukewarm in their faith. Baptisms of such infants are actually deferred in order to persuade parents and guardians to revive their faith and to be exemplary in their practice of it. There is modification of infant baptism laws.
- c) Admittance or non-admittance to Holy Communion. A cluster of rules and regulations has developed around the question of admittance to Holy Communion. For instance, women who are pregnant outside wedlock either refrain by themselves from reception of the Eucharist or they are officially prohibited from doing so once the pregnancy is public, even if earlier they had gone to sacramental confession and thereafter resumed partaking of communion. This twist in the law has obviously been influenced by (African) local culture's abhorrence of premarital sex and pregnancy.... The sacrament of confession alone is not deemed sufficient. Stricter and more demanding laws have been attached to the universal laws in order to highlight the idea of the "Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist."
- d) A seeming-extension of the "*sanatio in radice*." According to canons 1161-1165 radical sanation is granted to marriage which were contracted invalidly due to a defect or lack of canonical form and/or due to the presence of a dispensable impediment. In such validation matrimonial consent is not renewed; hence the necessity to verify that the consent of both parties persists when the sanation is being granted. In dealing with some irregular marriage situations involving nearly impossible cases of polygamy in some African church communities,

there has been long usage of sanation in favour of the first wife so that she may be able to be admitted to Holy Communion.

- e) The law on Marriage states that: “Marriage is invalid between those related by consanguinity in all degree of the direct line, whether ascending or descending, legitimate or natural. In the direct line, it is invalid up to the fourth degree inclusive” (canon 1091 §§1-2). However, in Nigeria, once any degree of consanguinity is traceable, the culture and custom disallow that marriage. The interpretation of this canon is neither modified nor misinterpreted. It is only a fact that the Nigeria culture and custom discourages any marriage between a man and a woman with a definite blood relationship.

Conclusion

For our conclusion let us return and revisit the initial point implied in the beginning: How can we develop a theological-juridical framework that is really African?

To decolonize theology and Canon law, one must be clear in one’s methodological and theoretical approaches. As our hypothesis we arrived at the central issue of inculturation. Decolonization is the process of undoing colonizing practices. Within the educational context, this means confronting and challenging the colonizing practices that have influenced education in the past, and which are still present today. In the past, schools have been used for colonial purposes of forced assimilation. Perhaps the most essential part of decolonization is continual reflection and a transition to inculturation.

The question of inculturation is an essential aspect of the need to apply the gospel as liberative principle in all aspects of the social and historical contexts of the believer. Evidence of inculturation in the New Testament includes the fact that the account of Jesus’ life is given in four different versions reflecting the situations of the evangelists. Theology must therefore not be understood as a reflection on a vague general revelation, but rather as good news expressed in particular situations, and understood and interpreted by particular peoples at particular times.³⁶ It is an account of people’s experience of God at different moments of their history. Its message is plurifocal and was given over a long period of time, within cultural settings and with different presuppositions. There is therefore the need to make the message belong to the present setting and to appropriate it to speak to present situations.

36. Justin Ukpong, *African Theologies Now: A Profile* (Elder: Gaba Publications, 1984), 30.

Consequently, inculturation and decolonization ought not be an “exhumation” of past customs for archaeological curiosity; cultures are not static but are continually shaped by changing circumstances.³⁷ Thus, the question of inculturation is more than a question of cultural idiosyncrasies and how these can be accommodated within the framework of Christianity. It is not an occasion for rhetoric or digging up old conceptions of life that may strike an odd note in the media.

37. A. Nebechukwu, “The Dialectic of Liberation Theology and Inculturation,” *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 1, no. 6 (1991): 64–71, 66.

CHAPTER 5

PALESTINIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND *SABT AL-NOUR* (HOLY LIGHT/FIRE)

John S. Munayer & Samuel S. Munayer

Introduction

It is difficult to describe the atmosphere in Palestine during the *Sabt al-Nour*/Holy Fire celebrations (following the Julian calendar); the excitement, joy, festivities, and traditions are all visible and centered around the Church of Resurrection (Holy Sepulchre).¹ Thousands of people in Palestine and millions abroad wait in suspense to witness the Holy Fire come out of Jesus' tomb. Every year, all the candles are blown out in the church on Good Friday; and on Saturday, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem will enter the tomb with candles and eventually emerge out with the candles lit on fire. According to tradition, the lighting of the candles is an annual miracle and has been taking place since the ninth century.² The fire coming out of the tomb symbolizes the power of resurrection, and like the spreading of the good news of the resurrection, people pass the fire from one candle to another. This Holy Fire is important for people that even special designated cars and planes fly the flame across the Christian Orthodox "world."³ Moreover, for local Palestinians, the fire is spread from community to community despite the checkpoints and walls of the occupation and they reference the holiday as *Eid al-Akbar*, meaning, "the big holiday"

Although, *Sabt al-Nour* is conducted by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and is celebrated according to the Julian calendar, it is commemorated by all Christian denominations in Palestine. Like other religious traditions in Palestine, *Sabt al-Nour* is not static but receives new meanings and

1. Local Christians call the church in Arabic: knist al-Qiyameh (Church of Resurrection).

2. Bishop Auxentios, *The Paschal Fire in Jerusalem: A Study of the Rite of the Holy Fire in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre* (Berkeley: Saint John Chrysostom Press, 1999).

3. Nir Hasson, "Empty Planes Fly 'Holy Fire' From Jerusalem Church to 10 Countries Amid Coronavirus," *Haaretz*, 2020, accessed August 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2020-04-18/ty-article/.premium/ten-empty-planes-fly-holy-fire-from-jerusalem-to-ten-countries-amid-coronavirus/0000017f-ef69-dc28-a17f-ff7f197a0000>.

significance according to its context⁴ Within a settler colonial reality of Palestine, the rise of attacks on Christians in Jerusalem, and the resistance of Palestinian Christians against Zionism, *Sabt al-Nour* has become a site of layered meanings, encompassing national liberation, *sumud*, and hope.⁵ Furthermore, it is a proclamation of Palestinian indigeneity which is the collective ontological identity of Palestinians that opposes the settler colonial project of Zionism.⁶

Despite *Sabt al-Nour*'s enormous significance for Palestinian Christians and its status as one of the most powerful and visible Christian traditions in Palestine, it has yet to be fully contextualized and articulated in writing by Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT). This gap in PLT aligns with the broader movement among liberation theologians to rethink and challenge Eurocentric, colonial, and elitist assumptions in their theological works. This reevaluation aims to counter Western dominance in theological knowledge production and to make theology more relevant to local contexts. We addressed these issues in our article "Decolonising Palestinian Liberation Theology: New Methods, Sources and Voices."⁷ In this article, we aim to further this decolonial endeavor by developing a PLT rooted in *Sabt al-Nour*.

First, this article will provide a brief overview of Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) and its relationship to coloniality. Next, it will delve into the tradition of *Sabt al-Nour*, arguing that this tradition is one of the most

4. Lance Larid, "Boundaries and Baraka: Christians, Muslims, and a Palestinian Saint," in *Muslims and Others in Sacred Place*, ed. Margert Cormack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 40–73.

5. For a detailed account of oppression against Palestinians, see: Amnesty International, "Israel's apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel system of domination and crime against humanity," Feb 1, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/>; B'Tselem, "A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid," Jan 12, 2022, https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid; Human Rights Watch, "A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution," April 27, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>.

6. Rana Barakat, "Writing/righting Palestine studies: settler colonialism, indigenous sovereignty and resisting the ghost(s) of history," *Journal of Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): 349–363; Jamal Nabulsi, "Reclaiming Palestinian Indigenous Sovereignty," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 52, no. 2 (2023): 24–42. Here we use the settler colonial framework developed by Fayeze Sayegh, "Zionism Colonialism in Palestine (1965)," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 206–225; and Patrick Wolfe, "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, to understand Zionism as a European settler-colonial movement that seeks to permanently settle and establish sovereignty on indigenous land, and in the process eliminate the Native people.

7. John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer, "Decolonizing Palestinian Liberation Theology: New Methods, Sources, and Voices," *Studies of World Christianity* 28, no. 3 (2022): 287–310.

potent forms of grassroots theology, embodying themes of liberation, hope, and steadfastness. To support this argument, this article will draw on popular sources and our own lived experiences with *Sabt al-Nour*. Finally, as Palestinian theologians, we will attempt to build a PLT based on the tradition of *Sabt al-Nour*, aiming to illuminate and articulate its existing spirituality through scholarly work. We hope this will inspire theological imagination within PLT, making it more relevant to the Palestinian people and contributing to the struggle for liberation, justice, and peace through intellectual thought.

1. Palestinian Liberation Theology and coloniality

PLT is one of the most well-known and developed liberation theologies in the Middle East; and in comparison, to other liberation theologies worldwide, it is one of the most ecumenical traditions of liberation theology.⁸ PLT has been particularly affective in challenging Zionism, both Christian and Jewish, by providing hermeneutical alternatives to Zionist readings of the Bible and testifying to the destructive consequences of settler colonialism through powerful and personal anecdotal accounts. Numerous Palestinian books, articles, conferences, and lectures have covered topics relating to justice, reconciliation, theology of the land, eschatology, identity and more.⁹ Naim Ateek, considered the father of PLT, remarks that this theology is not only a criticism of Christian Zionism but also an attempt to make theology “meaningful for Palestinian Christians” and useful to other Palestinians.¹⁰ In this way, PLT may speak to the daily lives of Palestinians. Through PLT, Ateek wished to respond to what Cedar Duaybis described as a “Theological Nakba.”¹¹

Whilst PLT is practiced and articulated daily by Christian laity and clergy, its academic form has mostly been articulated in English and pushed forward by Protestant and Catholic thinkers. As such, PLT has generally been directed towards a Western audience among other

8. Najib G. Awad, “Arabic Christian Theology,” in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe (University of St. Andrews Press, 2023), 1–27, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ArabicChristianTheology>; Elizabeth Martejin, “The Revival of Palestinian Christianity: Developments in Palestinian Theology,” *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context* 49, no. 3–4 (2020): 257–277; Rafiq Khoury, “Palestinian Contextual Theology: A General Survey,” in *Theology in the Palestinian Context*, ed. Rafiq Khoury and Zimmer-Winkel Rainer (Berlin: Aphorism Press, 2019): 9–46.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Naim S. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

11. Cedar Duaybis, “The Three Fold Nakba,” *Cornerstone* 66 (2013).

reasons,¹² and overwhelmingly dominated by Euro-centric methods and sources in its articulation.¹³ This of course is not unique to PLT alone; early expressions of academic liberation theology in other contexts were also dominated by Western methods and sources.¹⁴ Indeed, systems and values of coloniality dominate all spheres of life, including academia, theology, and the global church.¹⁵ For many, this hegemony ought to be disrupted and a process of rethinking must occur in order to decolonize Western hegemony.¹⁶ Audre Lorde encapsulates this process by proclaiming that “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.”¹⁷ Hence, liberation theologians have engaged in discussions about the goals, audiences, methods, and sources of their theology to decolonize it, making it more liberative, contextual, and disruptive. In comparison to other liberation theologies, this process has only recently begun in Palestinian Liberation Theology.¹⁸ Whilst we approach PLT with a critical perspective, we acknowledge that it is an anti-colonial theology aimed at challenging Western narratives and theologies that, as Mitri Raheb describes, serve as the “software” for the “hardware” of empire.¹⁹ Additionally, PLT is an Indigenous theology that seeks to contextualize the Christian faith to the Palestinian reality, highlighting God’s mission to liberate the oppressed. Importantly, the elders of PLT, particularly those who experienced the *Nakba* of 1948, are responding to profound trauma and have lived out their theology faithfully. Nevertheless, elements of Western hegemony in its epistemology, rooted in coloniality, constrain PLT’s contextual and liberatory message for the Palestinian people.

It is important to note that decolonization does not advocate for a purification. As Palestinian theologians who are attempting to decolonize our theology, we do not claim that we (or our theology) are immune of the effects of coloniality, quite the opposite. This article is shaped and

12. Rafiq Khoury being the exception who published mostly in Arabic.

13. Munayer and Munayer, “Decolonizing Palestinian Liberation Theology.”

14. Nicolas Panotto and Luis M. Andrade, *Decolonizing Liberation Theologies: Past, Present, and Future* (Cham: Springer Publishing, 2023); James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

15. Panotto and Andrade, *Decolonizing Liberation Theologies*.

16. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1961); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York and London: Continuum, 1970); Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 742–759.

17. Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

18. Munayer and Munayer, “Decolonizing Palestinian Liberation Theology.”

19. Mitri Raheb, *Decolonising Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023).

influenced by Western hegemony in many ways. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh show that escaping the colonial paradigm is an impossible task.²⁰ Edward Said reflects similar sentiments as he comments that “Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic. This, I believe, is as true of the contemporary United States as it is of the modern Arab world.”²¹ Said warns that rejecting the West completely can paradoxically reinforce the binary oppositions that colonialism relies upon. Thus, we wish to disrupt, the colonial matrix in which we all live in, including disrupting epistemological and ontological hegemonies for the purpose of liberating the Wretched of the Earth and helping in their steadfastness. This is a difficult undertaking to navigate, but this is precisely why we need to have these critical conversations in PLT, and other liberation theology traditions. The goal is not to be pure of coloniality, for that is unattainable and colonial in of itself. Part of the aim of decolonization is to challenge the systems, values and norms that continue to enforce, legitimize and fortify the oppression of those who are considered “non-human” or “human animals” in Palestine and around the world.²² Thus, critically engaging with PLT, illuminating its limitation and the coloniality it possesses, is itself aligned with PLT and part of its mission of responding to the question of “Weynak ya Allah?” (Arabic for “where are you God?”).

PLT must self-critically reconsider some of its frameworks and consistently engage in decolonial exercises. This theological task, among many factors, includes building PLT on Palestinian methods and sources. Like a Palestinian olive tree, PLT must be rooted in Palestinian theological-liberative soil, which constitutes its being and determines its voice. The Palestinian people, history, culture and land ought to be the minerals, water and light which allows for PLT to flourish and withstand the tough terrain, weather, and imperial violence. The Palestinian people ought to be the co-producers of this theological tree, and the academic expression of PLT must be part of this living tree, bearing the fruits of the people’s voices and resistance for liberation. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff in their own context describe liberation theology as a tree where the laity, clergy, and professional theologians all perform a certain role, whether it

20. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

21. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), xxv.

22. Rana Barakat, “Writing/righting Palestine studies: settler colonialism, indigenous sovereignty and resisting the ghost(s) of history,” *Journal of Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): 349–363.

be the leaves, fruits, and roots.²³ The Boffs parallel the professional theologians as the leaves and branches of the tree which may be more visible but hold the risk of overlooking the soil and the roots who are “submerged and anonymous.”²⁴ Therefore, we wish to theologize *Sabt-al-Nour*, which will aid PLT in highlighting the roots and connect all parts of the olive tree into a unified theological expression. In this way, theologizing *Sabt al-Nour* through academic expression seeks to ground academic PLT in the roots and soil of its being. With this intent, our theoretical production can be directed towards healing, liberation, and prayer.

2. *Sabt al-Nour*

Sabt al-Nour is one of the most exciting and important events in the annual calendar of Palestine. As children, we remember how the Holy Fire would make its way from Jerusalem to our grandparent’s home in al-Lyddā, where we would wait eagerly for its arrival. Unlike many Christian communities in the West, in Palestine Easter is a far more important religious holiday than Christmas. In fact, Palestinian Christians describe Easter as *Eid al-Kabir* (the big holiday). On the Saturday of *Sabt al-Nour*, literally “Saturday of the light” in Arabic, Christians in Jerusalem gather around the Church of Resurrection, in the Old City of Jerusalem, and Christians in other locations gather in their local churches and homes with family members. All these gatherings take to place to receive and celebrate the fire collectively, which symbolizes Christ’s resurrection, victory of death and lordship over all of creation.

According to tradition, the Holy Fire that the Patriarch of Jerusalem brings out of the tomb in the Church of Resurrection is an annual miracle.²⁵ One can see worshipers in a state of extreme emotion in the church as the fire emerges. It is common to hear Palestinian Christians shout out in Arabic: ‘al-Mesieh qam. Haqqan qam’ (Christ has risen. Indeed, he has risen), and greet each other with the same saying. Likewise, one can see various church scout groups marching in bands playing music, and other groups of young Palestinian Christians singing in the streets, waving flags, swords, and sticks as they dance to the beat of the drum (darbuka).²⁶

23. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

24. *Ibid.*

25. Bishop Auxentios, *The Paschal Fire in Jerusalem*.

26. Silvia Boraini, “Palestinian Scouts march in celebration of Orthodox Easter,” *Middle East Eye*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/palestinian-scouts-march-celebration-orthodox-easter>.

Importantly, the laity are at the center of the celebration with the Patriarch and the rest of the clergy performing a minor function. In many ways, this day receives a Palestinian Christian flavor to it across Palestine and is a potent expression of indigeneity.

While *Sabt al-Nour* should be a joyful and victories day, for many Palestinian Christians this day can also be a disappointing and violent day where they are reminded of the colonial system in which they live. Every year, there are several Palestinian Christians who live in the West Bank and Gaza who are denied the freedom of movement and religion. The Israeli Army restricts their ability to travel and worship in the Church of Resurrection in Jerusalem, for if one seeks to travel from the Palestinian Occupied Territories, they must receive a special permit from the military's administrative office.²⁷ With the ongoing genocide Israel is waging in Gaza following the attacks of October 7 by Hamas, it is reported that for the first time in history, the Holy Fire did not reach the Palestinian Christians in Gaza.²⁸

Even Palestinian Christians who can journey to the church, either through permits or as residents of the State of Israel, are not free to worship on one of their most significant occasions. Recently, the Israeli police have constrained gathering spots and the number of attendees around Jerusalem's Old City, limiting access to the Church of Resurrection.²⁹ This restriction severely hampers the ability of many Christians to partake in worship or join the customary parades led by scouts with their musical instruments. Elias Deis, a Palestinian Christian from Jerusalem, recalls that even within the Church of Resurrection, his attention was dominated by the presence of soldiers and police, overshadowing the spiritual experience with the omnipresence of occupation.³⁰ From our firsthand encounters, it is evident that the Israeli military can exhibit hostility and aggression towards worshippers who manage to reach the Old City and the Church of Resurrection. The denial of religious freedoms in Jerusalem

27. Joseph Massad, "Palestinian Orthodox Christians struggle against two colonialisms," *Middle East Eye*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/palestinian-orthodox-christians-struggle-two-colonialisms>.

28. "Gaza's Christians face subdued Easter Sunday amid Israel's bombs," *The New Arab*, May 5, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/gazas-christians-face-subdued-easter-amid-israels-bombs#:~:text=The%20Sacred%20Holy%20Fire%20is,Holy%20Fire%20into%20Gaza's%20churches>.

29. "Jerusalem church leaders decry Israel's heavy-handed' Easter restrictions," *Middle East Eye*, April 12, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-jerusalem-easter-church-leaders-decry-heavy-handed-restrictions>.

30. Alex Shams, "Palestinian Christians Celebrate Identity in Easter Rituals," *Middle East Eye*, July 28, 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/palestinian-christians-celebrate-identity-easter-rituals>.

is intimately entwined with the broader oppression experienced by Palestinian Christians, who are Indigenous people subjected to a settler colonial project. The surge in attacks against Christians and churches in 2023 by Israeli-Jewish individuals, along with pressures to seize church-owned lands from governmental and non-governmental entities, are connected to the violence witnessed during Easter.³¹ These actions all stem from the entrenched settler colonial framework of Zionism.

The increase of violence alongside the existing settler colonial structure Palestinian Christians undergo, makes *Sabt al-Nour* receive even more importance and additional meanings. Palestinian Christians not only resonate and contextualize the victory of the resurrection in the midst of oppression, colonialism, and religious abuse, but form theological interpretations from *Sabt-al-Nour*. By theologically engaging with *Sabt al-Nour* within the context of Palestinians, *Sabt al-Nour* can be a powerful source of encouragement and empowerment in the face of oppression. Indeed, the practice and tradition of *Sabt al-Nour* is an expression of indigeneity, proclaiming an ontological embodiment of the land of Palestine and connecting to a collective history over hundreds of years. Hence, the events of *Sabt al-Nour* are a celebration of one's Native Palestinian Christian identity irrespective of your confessional beliefs. When the Palestinian flag is waved during the celebration and traditional Palestinian clothing can be seen on both men (*keffiyeh* – Palestinian scarf) and women (*tatriz* – Palestinian embroidery), it is public expression of Palestinian beauty, collective identity, and belonging to the land.³² This celebration in the context of settler colonialism becomes a political act of resistance since the Native is celebrating their indigeneity which rejects the settler colonial attempts of erasure.

3. PLT and *Sabt al-Nour*

In the quest to decolonize our theology, and in the process indigenize it, we now turn to the theological content of *Sabt al-Nour* which is cultivated by the Palestinian laity who demands the academic expression of PLT to respond. We must reflect and produce theological knowledge which can

31. "Jerusalem church leaders decry Israel's heavy-handed' Easter restrictions," *Middle East Eye*, April 12, 2023; The Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue, "Attacks on Christians in Israel and East Jerusalem," 2023 Annual Report, <https://rossingcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Rossing-Center-Harrasment-on-Christians-2023-Annual-Report-Digital.pdf>.

32. Silvia Boarini, "Palestinian Scouts march in celebration of Orthodox Easter," *Middle East Eye*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/palestinian-scouts-march-celebration-orthodox-easter>.

complement the emancipatory lived spiritual practices of *Sabt al-Nour*. This attempt is crucial for our self-empowerment and resilience in light of the events in Gaza.

Firstly, the theology of *Sabt al-Nour* is a grassroots theology. These celebrations are centered around the laity, and not the clergy. It is a theology that comes up from the ground by and for the people rather than a theology that advocates to the West to reexamine its relationship with colonial Christianity. This form of theology is not dictated or controlled by the rules of Western theology which control the norms, language, method, and questions of theology. Thus, the theology of *Sabt al-Nour* for the academic gaze seems unpredictable, loud, colorful, family orientated, tasty and joyful. Indeed, this theology is not fully comprehended in an article but in the participation of the chanting, dancing, and overall celebration of *Sabt al-Nour*. This is one of the reasons why the masses connect and identify with the events of *Sabt al-Nour* as it is understood and produced without the need of academic jargon. Therefore, this theology is inclusive since anyone can participate in it and is not necessarily subjected to one's background, class, education, gender, church, family, status, etc. All are coproducers. The task of PLT is to take this "bottom-up" theological expression seriously and articulate its language through knowledge which affirms freedom and condemns sin. If PLT is to be emancipatory and lived, it ought to be contextual, dialogically engaging with the people so it may be meaningful. By doing so, this may compensate the academic elitist construction of PLT and empower the people who are disinherited. Exactly as Jesus did.

Secondly, the Indigenous practice of *Sabt al-Nour* can be connected to the popular concept of *Sumud* (Arabic for steadfastness). *Sabt al-Nour* is a reminder that Jesus is the ultimate *Samid* (the person who enacts *Sumud*). This stems from the symbolism of the fire which is the victory of resurrection by way of the cross and the inauguration of the kingdom of God. One can only understand the resurrection by dialectically interpreting it through the crucifixion, as Jon Sobrino reflects that when the "cross and kingdom are inherently related, then we can better understand them both in all their importance."³³ The magnitude of the celebrations exist precisely because of the enormity of evil manifested in the Roman Empire's brutality and religious authority's moral corruption that nailed Jesus on a cross. There is no resurrection without crucifixion. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that Palestinian Christians who

33. John Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 120.

live in the context of settler colonialism identify with the Easter story and interpret through their own stories of suffering. According to Palestinian theologian Nora Carmi, “the way of the suffering resonates especially with Palestinian Christians [because the] first station of the Via Dolorosa³⁴ is considered the ‘Nakba’ or when the world decided not to recognize us as a people with a right to live on our land with freedom.”³⁵ This reminds Palestinians that Christ is not alien to their suffering and calls them to continue embracing *Sumud* as a core tenant of their faith. This understands the cross through the present oppression of Palestinians and inversely. One must remember that Christ’s crucifixion was that of a political rebel,³⁶ therefore, the resurrection, the fire coming out of the tomb, is a statement against oppressive systems that they are defeated through God’s resurrection and identification with the oppressed. This hope is found amidst a reality of hopelessness, in a reality where things seem impossible. In essence, it provides the oppressed with the vision that the oppressors will never have the last word, even if they imprison, silence, distort the truth, and put one to death as was done to Christ.

Sabt al-Nour highlights God’s ultimate intervention in history through Christ. God liberates the oppressed by becoming one of them and incorporating their suffering to God’s own divine reality, paralleling James Cone’s Christology of the Black Christ.³⁷ The Palestinian Easter celebration cultivates theological inquiry and imagination which understands God’s ontology and revelation with the current reality and identity of Palestinians. Hence, Palestinian Christians are celebrating God’s victory over death and all forms of evil and proclaiming that their oppression and suffering is temporary. Furthermore, it is the affirmation that Palestinians are humans, image bearers of God, despite the systems and structures which demonize Palestinians daily. The Saturday of Light connects to John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Perhaps this is one of the reasons there is such an outpouring

34. Known as “The way of the suffering” representing the path Jesus took on the way to the cross. This path holds 14 stations in the old city of Jerusalem which ends at the Church of Resurrection. This path is walked by locals and pilgrims prior to the celebrations of *Sabt al-Nour*.

35. Dalia Hatuqa, “Palestinian Christians ‘bitter and left out’ of Easter celebrations,” *Aljazeera America*, April 19, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/4/19/easter-palestinianchristians.html>.

36. Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of the Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014); Mitri Raheb and Suzanne W. Henderson, *The Cross in Contexts: Suffering and Redemption in Palestine* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017).

37. James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1969).

of emotions during *Sabt al-Nour* amongst Palestinians. Perhaps, that is why Louay Said states that “Especially after the holy fire, after the bells [start] ringing ... we [Palestinian Christians] feel energy, we feel different.”³⁸

In the same way that the Holy Fire can spread and reach every Palestinian Christian home, despite the colonial borders and checkpoints, Christ’s power of liberation is not bound to any human obstacle or intervention. It transcends space and time, and spreads from person to person and actively empowering those who need relief from pain and suffering. Like the fire, Jesus’ resurrection shines brightest in the most dark and evil places, including in contexts of genocide, apartheid, and settler-colonization. The Holy Fire reminds us that God is active in the world and warms the hearts of those who are in refugee camps, open-aired prisons, checkpoints, or victims of genocide, ethnic cleansing, massacres, state sanctioned gang violence and ethno-religious dehumanization, discrimination and humiliation. Although, the Holy Fire was reported not to have reached the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza, in addition to the overall catastrophic reality in Gaza, it did not stop Palestinian Christians in Gaza from celebrating *Sabt al-Nour* with the rest of the Palestinian Christian Church.³⁹

Thirdly, *Sabt al-Nour* encourages Palestinians to take the Holy Fire out of the churches, and in some ways, render the physical structures and places as peripheral to the celebration. This is of course an ironic message coming from the “Holy Land.” The most basic fact of the resurrection is that the tomb is empty, after the fire is disrupted *Sabt al-Nour* occurs outside of the church, namely in the streets and homes. There is no point in staying in or around the tomb, quite the opposite, the liberative act of resurrection is meant to be spread around the world. This challenges both the traditional churches who tend to prioritize the stones of the churches more than the living stones, and all churches in the Holy Land who ponder why people are not attending their services as opposed to going out to the communities. If more churches would focus on spreading the gospel of liberation to all who would receive it outside of church, perhaps the local churches would be more impactful in the context that we live in. Moreover, with the decline of Palestinian Christian demography in Palestine, most churches complain or warn of Christian presence being extinct. Yet, *Sabt al-Nour* and eventually the events of Pentecost call not to stay in Jerusalem,

38. Brittany Browning and Reuben Browning, *Holy Fire* (CisternFilms Productions: 2020).

39. “Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter in Gaza, praying for an end to Israeli war on Gaza,” *Al-Mayadeen*, May 5, 2024, <https://english.almayadeen.net/videos/orthodox-christians-celebrate-easter-in-gaza--praying-for-an>.

but to preach liberation wherever they find themselves. Our mission as Christians is not to stay in any given place for the sake of maintaining a Christian presence (whatever that means), but to be agents of liberation and reconciliation wherever we find ourselves. As former Latin Patriarch (Emeritus) of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, wrote to the church in 1988:

We are a minority. But we, know that the greatness or the quality of the mission does not depend on the small or the large number of those who fulfil this mission. The mission is the same, irrespective of the numbers of those carrying it out. On the other hand, however, the responsibility of those fulfilling this mission, becomes greater if they are but few. If there is plenty of salt, only a small quantity is needed to season the food. But if there is little of it, all is needed.⁴⁰

Pre-occupying oneself with keeping Christians in Palestine is like keeping the Holy Fire inside of the Church of Resurrection. It is a distraction from our vocation and the power given to us. *Sabt al-Nour* has a radical ecclesiastic message of servitude which puts the lives of others first rather than the life of the institution. *Sabt al-Nour* demands us to face contemporary reality and work towards changing it, rather than remaining in our comfort zones or people groups. It requires agency to be representatives of Christ's kingdom by igniting the world with the message of liberation.

According to the tradition, and Palestinian lived religion, the Holy Fire does not burn you when it comes out of the tomb.⁴¹ This may be counter intuitive for Christians since we have all witnessed or experienced fire burning humans or objects, and theologically fire is also associated with God's judgment of the wicked. Yet, the Holy Fire has more of a connection with the burning bush Moses encountered in the desert (Exodus 3). Despite being able to burn all that is impure or unholy, God decides to show mercy on us. This holiness that is merciful speaks to the glory, honor and worthiness of God, who reveals themselves in forms that allow us to both witness their almightiness and survive it at the same time. In contexts of oppression and dehumanization, such as in Palestine, the holiness represented in the light of the fire reminds us that evil does not only exist in the individuals, movements and institutions that abuse power, but in ourselves as well. Therefore, it invites us to self-critically examine ourselves and to challenge the ways in which we too participate in the oppression of others. The fire purifies all, both oppressor and oppressed.

40. Michel Sabbah, "First Pastoral Letter of Patriarch Michel Sabbah, 1988," *Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem*, Dec 14, 2023, para. 46, <https://lpj.org/storage/2023/12/14/1st-pastoral-letter-of-michel-sabbah-1591181230-docx.pdf>.

41. Niels C. Hvidt, "The Miracle of the Holy Fire in Jerusalem," *The Orthodox Christian Information Center*, accessed Oct 2023, <http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/holyfire.aspx>.

At the same time, the fire is given to every individual. It affirms people who are not considered human or loved in the difficult world and context that we live in. When the fire passes to every Palestinian and international in the Holy Land, it affirms God's love for them. This assures the oppressed that God shares with them their light and victory of liberation over death, evil, and all kingdoms of the earth. It reaffirms and connects the words spoken by God from the fire burning the bush: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7). God sees the genocide in Gaza, the dehumanization Palestinians face every day by Israeli soldiers, the killings in the refugee camps by special units of the army, the demolished homes, and the countless other ways Palestinians suffer in the context of settler colonialism. Moreover, God sees all the multidimensional oppression humans face in Palestine because of sexism, capitalism, religious hypocrisy, and more.

It is important to mention that *Sabt al-Nour* is an ecumenical event. Indeed, it is led by the Greek Orthodox Church and patriarch, but all Christians celebrate this joyful event since it transcends sectarian boundaries. One can even observe Christians who belong to the western churches, such as Catholics and Protestants celebrating this Indigenous celebration. Thus, the theology of *Sabt al-Nour* may compensate the often protestant centric articulation of PLT and Palestinian Theology overall. One must remember that most Palestinians are Orthodox and do not belong to the Western Church,⁴² hence, cultivating a PLT that is contextual to the Palestinian Christians must strive to be ecumenical and applicable to all Christians. Hence, this compensates some of the limitations PLT holds regarding its relevance and language concerning Palestinian Christians.

Lastly, the celebration of *Sabt al-Nour* must also be viewed in relation to the season of Lent. People's minds, bodies, and spirits have gone through a special time of reflection, prayer, and observing what one eats. For many the fast is tiresome and frustrating. Hence, this adds to the anticipation of worshipers, waiting eagerly for the fire which does not come out of the tomb at a predictable time and take longer than one expects. Moreover, if one is in the Church of Resurrection, there will be little to no space to move around, the church will be noisy, and one can easily feel cramped, overwhelmed, frustrated, hot, and impatient. For the Palestinian worshipers living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, they would have woken up early to pass military checkpoints to make it to the ritual. These Israeli

42. Khalil Shikaki and Walid Ladadweh, "Migration of Palestinian Christians: Drivers and Means of Combating it," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research* (2020): 1–36.

military checkpoints are designed to make one anxious, uncomfortable, and powerless.⁴³ These feelings can be a common theme among those who attend the event at the church, and is amplified by the fast, uncertainty of time, crowded spaces and military control of movement and bodies. Therefore, the theology of *Sabt al-Nour* is done under intense, uncertain, uncomfortable, impatient and oppressive circumstances. These are the circumstances that liberation theology emerges and develops from.⁴⁴ One is meant to be feeling these emotions when thinking, speaking, and acting in relation to God and neighbor, in contrast to developing theology in comfortable, wealthy, secluded and airconditioned offices. Many theologies, especially when relating to Palestine, have been articulated by people in spaces and times that know very little of the reality in Palestine (including Palestinians living in or out of Palestine). Including those who are supposedly 'neutral' or 'pro both sides' about the situation. Their actions speak far more than their words. The theology of *Sabt al-Nour* emphasizes the need to be in the uncomfortable spaces and among the masses, in the same way that Jesus himself emerged himself among the people. Not only is theology meant to be practiced and articulated in these uncomfortable contexts, but the theology also itself ought to make those who are comfortable, uncomfortable. That is to say, the theology of oppressed people will always challenge those in power and privilege. PLT ought to embrace this form of theology from these spaces and for the masses.

Conclusion

This article is written in perhaps the most devastating and bloodiest times for Palestinians in modern history. The repercussions of decolonial theology and colonial theology on Palestine, are a matter of life and death for Palestinians. Indeed, Palestinian theology must be lived out even if it may come at a great cost so that our voices and actions may not only be relevant, but credible. It is precisely because of the events taking place in Gaza, and the overall 76 years of settler colonization, that we ought to reflect on the violence of Western epistemological hegemony and the erasure of Indigenous sovereignty in knowledge cultivation. Our bodies, histories, cultures, are at risk of being eliminated and in some cases have already been erased. Therefore, alongside our lament, it is imperative that we continually question the assumptions and frameworks in which we

43. Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020).

44. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*.

do Palestinian theology to disrupt hegemony and promote Palestinian wisdom and beauty. *Sabt al-Nour* is an Indigenous practice in Palestine which possesses profound theological significance and offers a means to challenge colonial paradigms. While we have only scratched the surface of this tradition, there are numerous other theological concepts within Palestine waiting to be explored and integrated into practical PLT. Challenging coloniality through PLT is a formidable endeavor, for it is challenging to entirely escape its grasp. Yet, we must acknowledge our limitations, especially when publishing in English within European academic journals, which underscores the complexity of this task. Nevertheless, we must utilize the platforms provided to disrupt the colonial framework and promote an alternative form of theological knowledge production.

Given Palestine's current reality, our theology must evolve in response to the changing "signs of the times," which brings new challenges, opportunities, and circumstances. We need to embrace innovation, creativity, and draw inspiration from our own tradition and culture with confidence so that we may witness to Christ and to the suffering of our people. We must recognize that God remains active in history, continually revealing themselves through our culture and tradition. There is no need for us to conform to Western theological standards or rely solely on their traditions; especially when promoting liberation, justice and reconciliation for all inhabitants living between the River Jordan and Mediterranean Sea.

CHAPTER 6

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL ENTANGLEMENTS FROM THE OLD WORLD TO THE NEW WORLD: TOWARD A CATHOLIC-MUSLIM DECOLONIAL THEOLOGY

Axel Marc Oaks Takacs

Introduction

The contemporary discipline of comparative theology operates under the assumption that it is distinct from “the old comparative theology” of the 19th and early 20th centuries.¹ The latter was still fundamentally shaped by Christian supremacy, universalist but hegemonic ideologies, colonialism, and a religio-racialized order that placed White Christians at the top of a hierarchy that descended in degrees, with Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and non-Christian religions at the bottom. The “new” comparative theology presumes to distinguish itself from its colonial lineage.² However, over the past decade scholarship has connected the new to the old and argued that comparative theology remains entangled and enmeshed in colonial legacies, hegemonic identity politics, and a World Religions Paradigm that continues to essentialize religions, often within a racialized frame.³ The comparative theologian “explores” a religion other than one’s own, “discovers resources” from that religion, and “returns” to

1. See Francis X. Clooney, *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010).

2. See Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3. The list of critiques of comparative theology is lengthy. I offer a few that are in my view most important: Judith Gruber in “(Un)Silencing Hybridity: A Postcolonial Critique of Comparative Theology,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid Locklin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 21–35; Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, “White Christian Privilege and the Decolonization of Comparative Theology,” in *The Human in a Dehumanizing World: Reexamining Theological Anthropology and Its Implications*, The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society (v. 67), ed. Jessica Coblenz and Daniel P. Horan, OFM (Maryknoll: Orbit, 2021): 85–95; and Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

their “home” tradition “enlightened” with insights for their own religious community and society in the form of constructive theological proposals shaped by the “voyage.” The scare quotes underscore the issue: is this just colonial extraction of resources and exploitation of people for the sake of self-enrichment? Given that most comparative theologians remain members of elite classes of society—White, Christian, cis-het male (though this is changing)—it seems the disentanglement of the new from the old was only ever imagined.

This chapter contribution is a product of ongoing critical reflections I have had in dialogue with decolonial and postcolonial theologians and the project of decolonizing Catholic theology. Indeed, comparative theology does require decolonization inasmuch as it is a form of Catholic theology for the most part practiced by and for Euro-North Americans. I will first give some background to the discipline. Then I will overview how it remains entangled and enmeshed in colonial legacies despite the best efforts of comparative theologians to disavow themselves from colonialism. Nonetheless, these efforts have challenged the field critically and constructively and so I review how the ongoing task of decolonizing the discipline is fairing. I will then turn to the Islamic religious traditions, Muslim communities, and their relationship to the Catholic Church and its (comparative) theological discipline. I elaborate how, in large part, Catholic comparative theology with the Islamic traditions has specifically perpetuated colonial discourses and regimes of power in two ways.

First, it has ignored the Christian imperial and colonial legacy of race-making from the Old World to the New World, namely, how racial imaginaries of the Muslim and Jew in Europe—and especially in the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean Basin—were extended to the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. In other words, the relationship between Catholic empires and Muslims fueled the colonization and racialization of the Americas.

Second, Catholic scholars of Islamic traditions, comparative theologians or otherwise, with few exceptions continue to ignore the lived religion and reality of Muslims living in a neoliberal, neocolonial and racial capitalist world. Despite our best efforts to decenter Catholic theology through comparative theology, many Catholic theologians continue to engage Islam through a neo-Orientalist frame that reifies Islam into an abstract religion based on elite discourses, based on an understanding of the Qurʾān as sole discursive interlocutor, based on occidental or Western-centric concerns, and ignorant of colonial legacies of political, economic, and cultural violence. In brief, many Catholic scholars of Islam and Muslim societies ignore contemporary political and economic systems that

remain structured by global, anti-Muslim racism, disproportionately and negatively impacting Global Majority Muslims: from Palestine to Yemen and Xinjiang Province (China), from the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and Muslim women in Bangladeshi garment factories to the ways in which the deaths of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, and Gazan Muslims are simply ignored by the global community—and so much more. I echo scholars of the Muslim International and Muslim Left, Soheil Daulatzai and Junaid Rana, who draw on Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Winter in rhetorically asking, “Can the Muslim be human?”⁴ Catholic theologians need to be challenged by their sharp inquiry precisely because Catholic theologies of the past remain the global politics of the present.

In closing, I offer one way to decolonize comparative theology with Islam in conversation with thought Indigenous to the land I call home, Turtle Island (North America).

1. Comparative theology

Comparative theology is systematic, critical, or constructive theological reflection on the Catholic tradition in light of theological traditions of other religions. In the spirit of Anselm, comparative theology is the discursive act of faith seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) that learns from other religious traditions, such as Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and so forth. In learning beyond confessional boundaries, the comparative theologian should be challenged by critical insights. Comparative theology reimagines theological systems in light of an interreligious, critical reading, and this re-imagining impacts how we read, write, and embody our relationship to God, self, and others. In the process of reimagining theological systems, comparative theology has the potential to be transgressive of theologies that have been held hostage by colonial legacies.

Yet, exercises in comparative theology frequently remain hegemonic, an heir to the 19th- and early 20th-century discipline of comparative religion that centered both whiteness and Western Christianity as the norm. Colonial epistemologies continue implicitly or explicitly to shape comparative theology. Furthermore, exercises in comparative theology remain at the level of *theoria* and not *praxis*, and their discourses are decisively elite and disconnected from lived religion. One remedy for this is to re-define comparative theology: we can do this by complementing, if not replacing, the Anselmian definition of comparative theology with one

4. Junaid Rana and Soheil Daulatzai, *With Stones in Our Hands: Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xi.

rooted in liberation theology. For Francis X. Clooney, comparative theology “marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions.”⁵ But what if, rather than Anselm, we instead defined comparative theology through Gustavo Gutiérrez, who defined theology as *reflexión crítica sobre la praxis a la luz de la fe*:⁶ comparative theology becomes “acts of ‘critical reflection on praxis in the light of faith,’ which are rooted in a particular faith tradition [and socio-political context], but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions [and other socio-political contexts].” Here, at a minimum, we give the comparative theological project a liberating or liberative praxis that shapes its theological conclusions and directs its goals toward liberation and justice along with embodied and integral spiritual flourishing and freedom.

This is a helpful first step. However, as a type of Catholic systematic and constructive theology, the discipline requires further decolonization just as most theology does.

2. Decolonizing comparative theology

The postcolonial and decolonial critiques of comparative theology are many and sharp. Scholars have noted how comparative theologians merely mine the riches and resources of the theological other for their own enrichment. It is thus the quintessential act of discursive, epistemological, and disciplinary colonialism: the other is used just enough for theological insights but rarely for a radical re-structuring and revolution of Catholic theology. It is true that the “new’ comparative theology of today presents itself as a non-hegemonic alternative to the theology of religions or the universalizing comparative theology of the past.”⁷ However, it remains largely White, Western, and Christian. As Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier has argued, “White Christian theological thinkers and categories define the academic field and control its spaces...[and]...Western Christian comparative theologians imagine falsely that they have created a new way of theologizing—with boundaries and borders *they* maintain.”⁸ In the end,

5. Francis X. Clooney, SJ, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

6. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología De La Liberación: Perspectivas* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1974), 34. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xlv.

7. Tiemeier, 85.

8. Tiemeier, 85.

comparative theology perpetuates the legacy of colonialism and “reinforces White Christian supremacy rather than subverting it.”⁹ Additionally, scholars such as Judith Gruber note how comparative theology ignores the historical and contemporary normativity of hybridity and syncretism among and within religious traditions and communities; comparative theology perpetuates religious essentializations and the World Religions Paradigm.¹⁰

However, as I have argued elsewhere, Catholic comparative theology performs explicitly and consciously what theology has always historically done: crossed religious and cultural borders, learned from other traditions and systems, and variously, adopted, adapted, appropriated, or rejected the ideas that were encountered.¹¹ From the first-century Jewish Jesus movement to the early encounter with Hellenic thought, from the engagement with Greek philosophy as refracted by Muslim and Jewish thinkers to the colonial and postcolonial transfiguration of the Christian tradition into a global religion variously inculturated and indigenized, when has “Catholicism” ever *not* been comparative and thus syncretic and when have Catholics every *not* been hybrid? On one level, then, comparative theologians are aware of this history and intentionally insert themselves into theology’s syncretic and hybrid history. They perform explicitly what Catholic theology has historically performed implicitly: they consciously elect to do theology interreligiously. Consequently, many comparative theologians often expose their positionalities and identities as they do comparative theology; this is evident in the autobiographical inflection found not only in Clooney’s works but also in other comparative theologians’. This is one methodological strategy embedded within comparative theology that can be employed toward decolonial aims.

This strategy resonates with postcolonial and contextual theologies. That is, crossing religious and cultural borders has *always* been a part of

9. Tiemeier, 85.

10. See Gruber, “(Un)Silencing Hybridity: A Postcolonial Critique of Comparative Theology.”

11. Axel M. Oaks Takacs, “Comparative Theology and Interreligious Studies: Embracing and Transgressing the Dialogical Relationships Among Religious Traditions,” in *A Companion to Comparative Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 563–582; and also, Axel M. Oaks Takacs, “A Response to Amir Hussain’s ‘Thinking Interreligiously with Muslims: A Practical, Not Primarily a Theoretical, Matter’ – Remembering the Past and Imagining the Future of Christian–Muslim Relations: The Creative and Destructive Power at the Borders,” in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 76, ed. Kevin Brown, 11–21, (<https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/15575/11429>). See also Axel M. Oaks Takacs, “Confluences of the Islamic in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics: Toward a Comparative Theo-Poetics with Islam,” in *Modern Theology* 40, no. 3 (2024): 650–677.

the colonial and the postcolonial experience, as the identities and ideas of colonizers mix with Indigenous traditions. Comparative theologians do well to learn from Gloria Anzaldúa and her *mestiza* or *nepantla* theory. As many Mexican, Mexican American, and Indigenous people will readily proclaim, being situated within and between borders facilitates hybridity, syncretism, and assuming multiple religious and cultural identities. Anzaldúa uses the language of the *mestiza* and the related notion of *nepantla*, which is a Nahuatl term for middle or in-betweenness. Learning from Chicana cultural, feminist, and queer theory, we benefit from recognizing that being mixed points to a capacity to embrace ambivalence and affirm the fuzziness of religious and cultural traditions; from this we may affirm the permeable nature of all boundaries and the artificial nature of all borders. This contrasts with the popular and conservative expectation that our identities and traditions are bounded territories, fixed, monolithic, and sharply demarcated.

A comparative theology in the perpetual process of decolonization has the potential to resonate with this postcolonial theory. Indeed, confessional comparative theology remains promising because it has embedded within it the tools and mechanisms interreligiously and interculturally to redraw the boundaries of Catholic identity and tradition through the careful study of other religious and theological knowledges, themselves deposits of challenging truths. It does this while being attentive to the ways in which the Catholic tradition has always been relational, dynamic, and mutable vis-à-vis local and global religious and cultural traditions—historically and presently.

Yet, comparative theologian Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier reminds us that comparative theologians have a lot more decolonial work to do. Drawing from the thought of Édouard Glissant and the image of the slave ship in the Middle Passage, “in which and through which enslaved peoples moved to the unknown future and birthed a new people,”¹² she reminds us that “Western academic comparative theology did not, and does not, stand with the enslaved who are chained in the slave ship; it is instead standing on the decks with the slavers, its own identity forged on the backs and bodies of enslaved, colonized people.”¹³ This is a sharp critique, but it is merited. Tiemeier argues that comparative theology can be saved, so long as it stands in relational solidarity with the colonized. Comparative theology must be realigned “to decolonial liberation and relational solidarity” and, she notes, “[passage] in, through, and back to the colonial

12. Tiemeier, 88.

13. Tiemeier, 88.

abyss requires a constant process of theological dispossession, loss of self, and rebirth to a creolized unknown that refuses to ignore the colonial ruins and its trauma.”¹⁴

I take her critique to be constructive and not destructive. That is, comparative theology may be “*enmeshed* in hegemonic and apologetic identity politics,”¹⁵ but it is not *essentially* so. It may be built on colonial ruins, but so is much of theology. In other words, these decolonial critiques do not stand merely for comparative theology, but they “stand for *any* theology that privileges elite, White, Western voices over those of the subaltern.”¹⁶ The critiques are arguably augmented and even more urgent because comparative theology employs cross-religious, cross-cultural, and cross-civilizational comparison that, given the legacy of Orientalism, runs an even greater risk of hegemony, epistemicide, subaltern erasure, colonial epistemological domination, and so forth.

However, two points emerge from this. First, we cannot let decolonial critiques become so entirely totalizing that the conditions for the possibility of interreligious and intercultural learning are completely removed. That is, we live in a broken world, a world marked by—to use Christian terms—original sin qua structural/social sin, a world in which power dynamics render some people politically dominant over other people across intersectional or kyriarchical lines of difference.¹⁷ These lines of differences are nearly all shaped by the legacies of former colonizers over the formerly colonized and present neo-colonizers over the neo-colonized. However, these power dynamics cannot foreclose the possibility for interreligious and intercultural learning. To use a personal example: there must be some way that I—as a White, cisnet, male Christian living on the eastern edge of Turtle Island on the ancestral lands of

14. Tiemeier, 92.

15. Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2020), 67, emphasis added.

16. Joseph Kimmel and Axel Takacs, “Introduction,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ*, ed. Joseph K. Kimmel and Axel M. Oaks Takacs (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2023).

17. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the term kyriarchy for the “socio-cultural and religious system of domination...constituted by intersecting multiplicative structures of oppression.” (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005], 118), which include race, gender, sex, class, religion, dis/ability, immigration status, and more. Kyriarchy is akin to what feminist and critical race theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins term intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Crenshaw coins the term in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” For a thorough definition, see Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 12. I also commend Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018).

Lēnapehòkink (Lenapehoking), with the utmost privilege of possessing United States and French dual citizenships—that I can still critically learn from both the Islamic traditions (my area of expertise) and Indigenous lifeways (an area of continued inquiry) *without* the process ipso facto being a colonial endeavor. In other words, the solution to the false (and exclusivist) universalism of the 19th and early 20th centuries ought not be a hyper-focus on particularities that render each person an inaccessible island; if the former demanded (forced) assimilation into one version of “the human” (the European one), then the latter may inadvertently render each person so utterly *other* and their experiences so utterly *foreign* that they are effectively imagined as non-human. The humanities succeed as a discipline of inquiry and transformation only under the assumption that we are all human and that our experiences and knowledges, with critical and reflexive thinking, are translatable; if not, what are we doing?¹⁸

This leads us to the second point. How do we decolonize comparative theology so that we take the critiques seriously while not constructing an aporia, an insurmountable and impenetrable colonial impasse? How do we learn from the Middle Passage without rendering comparative theology without passage (*a-póros*)? Is this a resolvable or irresolvable aporia? On one side of the impasse looms the silence of impenetrable walls—I can never learn from the other without colonizing. On the other side looms “the possibility that comparative theology merely subsumes the insights of other traditions into (usually) Christian theology and its systematic project.”¹⁹ But what lies in between, in the liminal spaces of *nepantla*? We must avoid a *binary* choice that enacts a colonial epistemology, a cis-heteropatriarchal epistemology that divides the world into binary categories and impenetrable borders— between colonizer and colonized, human and non-human, humans and land, male and female, Christian and non-Christian (formerly the savage), straight and gay (the “sexually deviant”), normal and abnormal, and so on.²⁰ Instead, Anzaldúa’s

18. Caner K. Dagli explores the question of the human in the secular, post-Enlightenment context in his *Metaphysical Institutions: Islam & the Modern Project* (New York: Suny Press, 2024). I connect his work to the nature and purpose of the humanities in Axel Takacs, “Returning to the Central Question of the Humanities: What Does it Mean to be Human and to Share Human Consciousness?” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 43 (2024): 115–132.

19. Takacs, “Comparative Theology and Interreligious Studies,” 565.

20. On the Christian process of imagining and constructing religionized others in this manner, see the recent monograph by Marianne Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2024) and my critical essay, Axel Takacs, “Selfing and Othering Between Theology and History: A Constructive Engagement with Marianne Moyaert’s *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*,” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 59, no. 4, (Fall 2024): 587–598.

nepantla theory embraces ambivalence and in-betweenness. Postcolonial experiences compel us to reckon with the fact that borders—cognitive categories that cut up phenomena for our rational consumption, colonial categorization of peoples to facilitate their management, religio-racialized categories that separate one people from another in a hierarchy, and so on—are all socially imagined. There are other ways to imagine the world and other modalities of embodiment.²¹

Closer to where I call home, I draw our attention to the Nishnaabeg, the peoples Indigenous to Turtle Island—specifically the Northeastern Woodlands—and presently inhabiting the Great Lakes region of Canada and the United States. Nishnaabeg writer Leanna Betasamosake Simpson speaks of Nishnaabeg intelligence and grounded normativity as a *modality*, a *how* that is very much in line with the relational solidarity required for a decolonial comparative theology: “It became clear to me that *how* we live, *how* we organize, *how* we engage in the world—the process—not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation... Engaging in deep and reciprocal Indigeneity is a transformative act because it fundamentally changes modes of production of our lives. It changes the relationships that house our bodies and our thinking.”²² Nishnaabeg intelligence is a poetics that structures all embodied knowledges through “nonhierarchical relation” in which there is a “continual creation of Nishnaabeg ontology, axiology, and epistemology.”²³ This land-based pedagogy and epistemology offers “Nishnaabeg conceptualizations of Aki [land, earth] [that] are at their core profoundly relational”²⁴ and it leads to “radical resurgence,”

21. Given the subject of this chapter—Islamic-Christian comparative theology—Thomas Bauer’s argument is of import. He illuminates the pre-modern and modern, European obsession with erasing ambiguities in comparison with the non-modern (classical and post-classical) Islamic *tolerance* of ambiguity. His insights are relevant to this chapter: “In this regard, the culture of Islam diverges conspicuously from mainstream Western traditions, whether of ancient classical or medieval times, which in many areas (although not all) rejected ambiguity. This phenomenon of rejection can be observed in the earliest instance of a theoretical approach to ambiguity, namely in Aristotle’s employment of the word *amphibolia* as a term for (syntactical) ambiguity, which for him means a linguistic blemish.” Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 12–13). Thenceforward, ambiguity, i.e., a lack of clarity and differentiation between mutually exclusive opposites, such as “normal” and “deviant” behavior, including that of sexual desire and gender expression, reigns supreme in the European context. This binary intolerance of ambiguity is exported to the rest of the world via colonialism and “non-Western societies that emulate the West begin to fulfill the standards of the West at the precise moment when those standards are not valid anymore.” (Bauer, 267).

22. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 19.

23. Simpson, 160.

24. Simpson, 160.

which draws from Nishnaabeg intelligence and grounded normativity and points to “nonhierarchical relationships between land and bodies, bodies meaning the recognition of our physicality as political orders, and our intellectual practices, emotions, spirituality, and hubs of networked relationships.”²⁵

While I can never enter into Nishnaabeg grounded normativity, I can allow it to transform how I live, work, play, parent, teach, garden, and, more directly related to my contribution to this volume, research and produce scholarship. I am called to subvert settler-colonial and hierarchical ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies with non-hierarchical, mutually relational knowledges that upend binary modes of thought. There must be a nondual approach to comparative theology that exercises comparison and interreligious learning (1) within the liberating praxis of relational solidarity with the subaltern, (2) attentive to lived religion as much as so-called elite discourse, and (3) critically informed by Indigenous lifeways.

The remainder of this chapter explores one possible comparative theological passage. It is a particular case born from idiosyncratic experiences. I am a scholar of Islamic Studies, particularly classical and post-classical Islamic intellectual, poetic, and commentarial traditions in the languages of Arabic and Persian. I am likewise a comparative theologian, albeit informed by the reflections expositied above. However, these idiosyncratic experiences have the potential to shape other North American comparative theologians who engage the traditions of Islam. What would it mean to surrender (*islām*) to decolonial knowledges Indigenous to Turtle Island? What do Central and North American Indigenous lifeways and peoples have to do with Islam and Muslims? We can connect the two by excavating the colonial ruins of Catholic-Muslim interaction. What this excavation uncovers is patterns of race-making that link Muslims with those Indigenous to the Americas, Black Africans, and immigrants from the Global Majority. Attending to this history in exercises of comparative theology with Islam is one small step in decolonizing the discipline.

3. Catholic comparative theology and/with Islam

What are the colonial ruins, trauma, and legacies of Catholic-Muslim interaction in the past that have shaped our colonial, neocolonial, and imperial present? The history of Christian interactions with Muslims in the medieval period impacted the European history of colonization, warfare, and empire building from 1492 to 2025 and beyond—from Ayiti or

25. Simpson, 44.

Hispaniola to Iraq, from Turtle Island to Yemen and so much more in between, from the Spanish *encomienda* system and the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the half a million children dead from malnutrition in Iraq because of US sanctions in the 90s, or the 38 million mostly Muslim refugees caused by post-9/11 US-led wars, also the cause of 200,000 Iraqi civilian deaths, 71,000 civilian deaths in the Afghanistan/Pakistan warzone, 250,000 deaths in Yemen since the 2014 US-backed war, the ongoing death and destruction in Gaza, and so on. While a coincidence, it is certainly ominous that 1492 marks both the beginning of the enslavement, sex trafficking, genocide, gendercide, and land dispossession of the Indigenous in the Americas *and* the expulsion of Jews from Spain, to be followed later by the expulsion of Muslims—*conversos* and *Moriscos*. Elsewhere I have detailed the genealogy that links Christian theological supersessionism to anti-Judaism, antisemitism, (White) Christian supremacy, anti-Islamic theology, and anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia.²⁶ Here, I would like to zoom in on specifics that are directly relevant to decolonizing Catholic comparative theology with Islam.

Consensus among scholars is that 1492 marks the invention of race, even if there is significant evidence to suggest race-making was happening throughout the medieval period.²⁷ Suffice it to say, the colonization of the Americas by Europeans coincided with the development and implementation of the *limpieza de sangre* system, or blood purity laws, in the Iberian

26. See Axel Takacs, “Undoing and Unsayng Islamophobia: Toward a Restorative and Praxis-Oriented Catholic Theology with Islam,” *Horizons* 48 (2021): 320–366.

27. Whether “race” existed in the Middle Ages is an open argument; see, e.g., Chapter 8 (“Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of ‘Jewish’ Blood in Late Medieval Spain”) in David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). However, it seems certain that at least “race-making” was a process that began well before 1492, and as early as the eleventh century, as Geraldine Heng argues. Her thesis is “that ‘race’ is one of the primary names we have—a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes—attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment” (Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019], 27). The process of inventing race is intertwined with theology, which employed religious difference “both socioculturally *and* biopolitically: subjecting peoples of a detested faith, for instance, to a political theology that can biologize, define, and essentialize an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different in an interknotted cluster of ways. Nature and the sociocultural should not thus be seen as bifurcated spheres in medieval race-formation: they often crisscross in the practices, institutions, functions, and laws of a political—and a *biopolitica*—theology operationalized on the bodies and lives of individuals and groups” (Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 27).

peninsula and the racialization of Muslims and Jews, which carried over into the racialized practices against the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, Africa, and the rest of the world. Junaid Rana summarizes it best:

The racialization of Islam emerged from the Old World, was placed on New World indigenous peoples, and subsequently took on a continued significance in relation to Black America and the world of Muslim immigrants. Thus, the category of Muslim in the U.S. is simultaneously a religious category and one that encompasses a broad race concept that connects a history of Native America to Black America to immigrant America in the consolidation of anti-Muslim racism.²⁸

Rana exposes the racialization of Islam and the category Muslim and why it is possible, for instance, for the phrase “they looked Muslim” to have meaning in our current social reality.²⁹ But he also provides a genealogy of “the Muslim” that links Iberia to Ayiti.

Furthermore, historian Alan Mikhail has demonstrated how the threat of Islam and Muslims in Europe fueled the colonization of the Americas. Europeans in the New World re-enacted, as it were, the Crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries on new soil. Mikhail labels this war-making a “Catholic jihad.”³⁰ We can be critical of deploying “jihad” to describe a process that is very much emic to the Catholic tradition. After all, the history of the Catholic tradition upon its alliance with empire through the Edict of Thessalonica (380 CE) is replete with Catholic violence against the imagined or real enemy—Jews, heretics, pagans, “Muhammadans,” Saracens, Indians, “Turks,” “Moors,” and so forth. There is no need to employ a foreign word to describe a Catholic practice. Nonetheless, Mikhail’s point is insightful: “Long after the many Matamoros—Moor-slayers—who sailed to the Americas aboard Columbus’s ships were dead themselves, Islam would continue to forge the histories of both Europe and the New World and the relationship between the two.”³¹

We must recall that from the end of the 15th century to the end of the 17th century, the fear of Islam—Islamophobia—and anti-Muslim theology shaped Christian political theology and was in part used to justify colonial expansion into the New World. This threat—real or imagined—shaped European colonial history. Imperial warfare between European armies

28. Junaid Rana, “The Story of Islamophobia,” *Souls* 9, no. 2 (2007): 151.

29. See the stories of the murders of Cameron Mohammed, a Catholic raised in Florida and born in Trinidad, and Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh American—both of whom were murdered because they “looked Muslim” (Erik Love, *Islamophobia and Racism in America* [New York: New York University Press, 2017], 1).

30. Alan Mikhail, *God’s Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 386.

31. Mikhail, 386.

and Ottoman forces drove the European search for territorial hegemony and resource control, resulting in the European expansion into the New World. Christian-Muslim interaction and relations therefore need to be included in the history of European colonialism and in the formation of colonial theologies that justified the subjugation of Indigenous peoples—worldwide.

Elsewhere, Mikhail reminds us that Islam as a threat to the Americas is embedded within, in particular, the United States' cultural memory. The history of Islamophobia must not begin with the late 20th century, as the term emerged. Rather, fear of Islam is as old as the history of colonialism.

After 1492, European colonialism...folded the Americas into the long history of European-Islamic relations...The origins of the American people must obviously include the history of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and the Americas, West Africans, and the Jewish and Catholic subjects of mainland European polities. This history must also include Muslims, both African slaves and [Ottoman Muslims].³²

Echoing in part Rana's conclusions, but from a historical perspective, "Islam was the mold that cast the history of European racial and ethnic thinking in the Americas, as well as the history of warfare in the Western Hemisphere."³³

When Spanish Catholic conquistadores landed on the New World and began to colonize what they would call New Spain, Islam/Muslims was the frame through which they viewed the lands and peoples. They could see *nothing but* Muslims. Their cognitional categories had been shaped so much by the threat of Islam that their binary thinking reduced their conceptualization of "the other" to "the Muslim" and thus to "the enemy." Furthermore, embedded in their social imaginaries was the language inherited from the Catholic Crusades. One example from the history of exhortations for the Crusades suffices to cast in relief the socio-linguistic symbolism that shaped Catholics who engaged in military conquest in the New World. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), none other than the author of such classics in Christian spirituality as *On Loving God* and *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, counseled the newly formed Knights Templar in his *Liber ad milites Templi: De laude novae militiae* (Treatise on the Knights Templar: In Praise of the New Knights). These knights were headed into territory occupied by Muslims. "Indeed, when [the knight] kills an evildoer (*malefactorem*), he is not a man-killer (*homicida*) but, if I may put it, an evil-killer (*malicida*); he clearly avenges Christ against those who

32. Mikhail, 396.

33. Mikhail, 396.

commit evil and has gained the reputation of a defender of Christians!”³⁴ Centuries of language such as this shaped Catholic military men into the 15th century. The result was a binary axiological structuring shaped by a dualistic ontology: to kill the Moorish Native was not to commit homicide, but malicide. Evil, after all, is a lack of being, a deficiency (as Augustine of Hippo would have it); evil, in this case, is not only *non-human*, but *nothing*. St. Bernard would respond to Rana’s and Daulatzai’s inquiry, “Can the Muslim be human?”³⁵ with an emphatic “No!”

As the Spanish ventured into the New World, they claimed to see mosques everywhere, conflating Indigenous structures with Muslim worship spaces. They claimed Indigenous peoples were wearing “Moorish”—or Muslim-like—clothing and performing “Moorish”—or Muslim-like—dances. They surmised that Muslim Turks would arrive via the Pacific, and that their enslaved West African Muslims would attempt to convert Indigenous peoples to Islam. These Spanish conquistadores were formerly the *Matamoros* (Moor- or Muslim-killers) of the Crusades and the descendants thereof. In fact, *Matamoros* or *Matamoros* is the name of ten cities in Mexico; furthermore, within the United States, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania each have a town named *Matamoros*—Muslim-killers. Unfortunately, it is sadly only appropriate that, from 2019–2023, the site of some of the worst consequences of US immigration and drug policies, along with global neoliberal, neocolonial and racial capitalist economics of forced migration, were being played out in none other than *Matamoros*, Mexico.³⁶ The embodied consequences of the linkage between anti-Muslim racism and immigrant America is all too apparent.

In brief, Catholic scholars and comparative theologians who engage the Islamic traditions must reckon with the ways in which Catholic-Muslim conflict shaped colonial practices. The Spanish who arrived in the New World imagined the Indigenous peoples as Muslims and their temples as mosques. More dangerously, the racialization of Muslims (and Jews) was extended onto the Indigenous and non-Christian from Asia to Africa and the Americas. The conflict—real or imagined—between Christians and Muslims accelerated and augmented the European colonization of the New World. A decolonial Catholic, comparative theology with Islam must reckon with this colonial legacy.

34. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Liber ad milites Templi: De laude novae militiae*, in *Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), under “Liber ad milites Templi De laude novae militiae - Bernardus Claraevallensis - s. 12 p.C.,” par. 4, vol. 3, pag. 217, line 9.

35. Rana and Daulatzai, xi.

36. The list of news stories is protracted. One may simply query “*Matamoros*” in NPR’s search engine: <https://www.npr.org/search/?query=Matamoros&page=1>.

4. Decolonizing Catholic comparative theology with Islam: toward a Catholic-Muslim-Indigenous liberation theology

So what would it mean to decolonize Catholic comparative theology with the Islamic traditions? How is Catholic comparative theology with the Islamic traditions transformed when the aforementioned colonial and race-making legacies are recognized? What do we make of the colonial entanglements between, on the one hand, anti-Islamic theology, anti-Muslim racism, and Islamophobia—not to mention anti-Judaism and antisemitism—and, on the other, the enslavement, sex trafficking, genocide, gendercide, and land dispossession of the Indigenous in the Americas and worldwide?

Furthermore, we can add the following: when Catholic scholars of Islam and comparative theologians engage the rich and complex Islamic traditions, they often ignore the lived religion and reality of Muslims living in a neoliberal, neocolonial, racial capitalist world. This politico-economic system we have today took root in the colonial practices of extractive capitalism and exploitative labor and in the racist ideologies—indeed, race-making and racist theologies—of imperial Christianity, in which Islam and Muslims were likewise racialized. Today, Islamophobia is integrated into our racialized, economic structures. In addition to Indigenous peoples, many victims of racial capitalism from the Global Majority are subaltern Christians and Muslims, even while many Christian-majority and Muslim-majority nations perpetuate their subjugation. Members of the Muslim Left and Muslim International have demonstrated that “these systems of dominance normalized anti-Muslim racism at the core of empire.”³⁷ We see this in many forms: global powers shut their eyes to the plight of Muslims from Palestine to Yemen, Syria to Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, and Muslim-majority regions of Africa; the authoritarian government of China has adapted neocolonial and racial capitalism insidiously through their debt-trap diplomacy of the Belt and Roads initiative and through their cultural, if not physical, genocide of the Uighur Muslims.

However, the experiences, knowledges, and epistemologies of the Muslim Left and Muslim International illuminate “a radical history of critique and protest that imagines another world in line with struggles for social justice, decolonial liberation, and global solidarity.”³⁸ Catholic comparative theologians can surely remain constructively engaged with classical and

37. Rana and Daulatzai, xvi.

38. Rana and Daulatzai, x.

post-classical Islamic thought, to be sure. However, to decolonize the discipline, attention to contemporary Muslim thought and to Indigenous voices is necessary. As a resident myself of Turtle Island, in which the legacy of anti-Muslim racism is entangled with Indigenous oppression, one strategy is to surrender to Indigenous axiologies and lifeways of Turtle Island to frame a decolonial Catholic-Muslim comparative theology. If the history of Catholic-Muslim conflict in part produced our current unjust and inequitable global racial and neocolonial capitalist order, then Catholic-Muslim solidarity, co-resistance, and co-creation—learning from and with Indigenous peoples—will be necessary to repair the harm and to create a more just and equitable society.³⁹

Thinkers and scholars Indigenous to Turtle Island are not monolithic. However, Indigenous authors such as Vine Deloria, tink tinker, Qwo-Li Driskill, Robin Kimmerer, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson do agree on the following: Indigenous lifeways presuppose a deep and non-hierarchical relationship among Indigenous peoples and between their bodies and the land. Nishnaabeg intellectual Betasamosake Simpson, already mentioned, speaks of Indigenous bodies as political orders. In this way, the particularities of Nishnaabeg anthropology—we might say land-based anthropology—illuminates a key tactic of colonial powers and the Indigenous resistance thereto: bodies always get in the way of imperial hegemony and control. A key strategy of colonialism is to remove bodies from land—or at least disempower them—and a key strategy of Indigenous resistance, for Simpson, is to distribute political power across networked hubs of Indigenous communities across the land. There is no state capitol to storm, no central leader to execute—this non-hierarchical political system keeps Indigenous communities resisting settler colonialism because their power is distributed, renewable and perpetually regenerated.

But even more than this, their knowledges are continuously re-created. Nishnaabeg bodies, according to Simpson, generate Nishnaabeg intelligence and grounded normativity. As already mentioned, this grounded normativity structures knowledge and embodiment through “nonhierarchical relation” in which there is a “continual creation of Nishnaabeg ontology, axiology, and epistemology.”⁴⁰ I have already noted how Nishnaabeg intelligence and grounded normativity is a *modality*, a *how* that is very much in line with the relational solidarity required for a decolonial

39. I begin this process in “Drawing Near to God, Drawing Near to Others: On Fratelli Tutti, Friendship (*Walāya*), and Muslim-Christian Co-Resistance,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 32, no. 1 (September, 2022): 33–65.

40. Simpson, 20.

comparative theology: “*how we live, how we organize, how we engage in the world—the process—not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation... Engaging in deep and reciprocal Indigeneity is a transformative act because it fundamentally changes modes of production of our lives. It changes the relationships that house our bodies and our thinking.*”⁴¹ Nishnaabeg intelligence is deeply embodied—practices are both spiritual and political, creative and subversive. How could comparative theology learn from Nishnaabeg intelligence in a way that is not extractive—in a way that is truly decolonial? Is it possible? How might a specifically Catholic-Muslim comparative theology be critically and constructively shaped by Nishnaabeg intelligence and grounded normativity?

A tentative answer is to connect Nishnaabeg intelligence to the experiences, knowledges, and epistemologies of the aforementioned Muslim Left and Muslim International, a collection of Muslim authors and activists working toward decolonial liberation and global solidarity. We can frame the outcome of comparative theology as a transformation of *our* modes of production of our lives, and then comparative theology becomes an embodied process that transforms how we live, work, parent, teach, garden, play, produce, consume, and organize, but in relational solidarity with the formerly colonized and presently neo-colonized, across lines of intersectional and kyriarchical difference.

We need not abandon classical, post-classical, and contemporary Islamic theology and Muslim knowledges, either. We need not discard these traditions merely because they are not overtly and intentionally part of decolonial liberation. Quite the opposite: for centuries, Euro-American Orientalist scholarship dismissed any Islamic intellectual traditions after the so-called “Islamic Golden Age,” as if anything written after Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) was a “decline” from the peak. This peak, according to Orientalists, was there only ever to serve as temporary guardian of Greek thought, eventually transmitted back to Europe where it belonged and where it could flourish. However, this Orientalist position ignores the development, reception, and refraction of Islamic thought from the 13th to the 18th century and into the modern period, as if nothing of import could be offered as responses to theological and philosophical questions of our time. Knowledge of “the Orient” became strictly utilitarian: to facilitate the colonial classification, categorization, and management of people. Decolonizing comparative theology requires attending to post-classical Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions as

41. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 19.

deposits of knowledges that have the potential to challenge, subvert, and reshape contemporary theology.⁴²

Furthermore, historically and contemporarily, Islamic theological and spiritual traditions are deeply embodied precisely because Muslim rituals and Islamic spiritual practices demand embodiment—that is, enactment of the Prophet’s body, Muhammad’s body, in Muslim relationships and communities. The predominant *modus vivendi* for most Muslims from the 13th to 19th century and from West Africa to South Asia was Sufism and its poetic literature.⁴³ Sufism as an embodied practice is often lacking in Orientalist scholarship, which tended to underscore the disembodied “monistic pantheism” of Sufism. But Sufism is lived religion par excellence, and poetry bridged Sufism qua lived religion with Sufism qua elite discourse. Metaphor, paradox, and ambiguity were “of existential significance to Muslims’ meaning-making”⁴⁴ in these traditions—an ambiguity that often challenged the sharp borders and impenetrable walls of both precolonial orthodox authority and postcolonial fundamentalist movements. Furthermore, Thomas Bauer, in *A Culture of Ambiguity*, complements Ahmed’s arguments: post-classical Islamic traditions and societies of Muslims had a high tolerance for ambiguity. Rather than disambiguate or entirely remove ambiguity, Bauer demonstrates how these traditions sought to tame, cultivate, domesticate, and train oneself in ambiguity. The cultural, religious, and theological value of ambiguity was present in societies of Muslims up to their encounter with colonial Europe.⁴⁵ Indeed, the valorization of ambiguity finds an ally in Anzaldúa’s postcolonial *mestiza* or *nepantla* theory of hybridity. Additionally, the poetic traditions of Muslim communities were deeply connected to embodied practices, emulation of the prophetic body as well as re-integration into the prophetic body.⁴⁶ These communities, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts,

42. See, e.g., Takacs, “Confluences of the Islamic,” in which I explore one possible comparative theological response to this history.

43. This is the argument of Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Important of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

44. Ahmed, 392.

45. See Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity*.

46. This is eminently the case with poetry in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. See Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muhammad* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) and Oludamini Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection: a Study of West African Arabic Madīḥ Poetry and Its Precedents* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2020). For a decolonial approach to Christian assessments of the Prophet Muhammad that take into account these poetic traditions of prophetic praise, see Axel Takacs, “The Prophet Muḥammad between Lived Religion and Elite Discourse: Rethinking and Decolonizing Christian Assessments of the *uswa ḥasana* through Comparative Theological Aesthetics,” in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 34, no. 3, (2023): 245–284.

enacted resistance to colonial powers and unjust systems of domination through a theo-poetics of relation *and* resistance. Many Muslim movements of resistance against European colonialism were led by Sufi leaders, that is, charismatic spiritual leaders from the Islamic mystical traditions.⁴⁷ They, too, utilized their networked hubs of Sufi communities to rally in resistance to colonial powers. Here, we see a relation between Indigenous resistance (Simpson's "hubs of networked relationships"⁴⁸) and Sufi resistance against colonialism.⁴⁹ The traditional daily prayer (*ṣalat*) itself is grounded in a creative relationship with the land, a theological imaginary that suggests the supplicant is nearest to God when their forehead touches and rubs the dirt in prostration (*sujūd*).⁵⁰

There are other passages for a decolonial comparative theology with the Islamic tradition that reckons with the Middle Passage rather than end in *a-poria* (*without passage*).⁵¹ However, let me end with a conclusion of sorts. I am still trying to make sense of how to decolonize comparative theology with the Islamic traditions. In a way, I am seeking to hold two things together: First, a desire to keep the slow, methodical, and creative reading of classical and post-classical Islamic intellectual traditions in conversation with Catholic theology as part of any comparative theology—the comparative theology of the modern discipline's founder, Francis X. Clooney, SJ. And second, a desire to be shaped by the Indigenous and subaltern Muslim struggle for social justice, decolonial liberation, and global solidarity—a decolonial comparative theology. These two must come together because Muslims do not exist in texts. Rather, they embody, emplace, and enact Islamic traditions in the context of global anti-Muslim racism and a neoliberal, neocolonial, racial capitalism that continues to subjugate not just Muslims, but postcolonial Christian communities and colonized Indigenous peoples—and indeed all subaltern communities—worldwide. We need not pit classical and post-classical Islam and comparative theology against the goals of decolonizing Catholic theology; instead, I have offered a preliminary essay on how to bring the two together to construct a passage among the ruins of the Middle Passage.

47. I expand on this in Takacs, "Drawing Near to God, Drawing Near to Others," 52–54.

48. Simpson, 44.

49. Though here their resistance is arguably better described as anti-colonial than decolonial.

50. See Takacs, "Drawing Near to God, Drawing Near to Others," 59–60.

51. Reckoning with aporia in creative ways is precisely an Islamic theo-poetic response to Christian theological approaches to aporia, which tend to resolve them or remain silent in front of them. See Axel Takacs, "Theological Aporia and the Cultivation of Desire: Reading Eriugena's *Creatio Ex Nihilo* through an Islamic Theo-Poetics," in *Theological Studies* 84, no. 4 (2023): 679–707.

Epilogue

The original draft of this chapter was written before the Hamas-led October 7, 2023, attacks against Israel and the subsequent and ongoing Israeli military response. The historical and current indignities and suffering most Palestinian civilians undergo at the hands of Israeli policies enacted and enforced by its elected and non-elected government officials are well-documented, just as are the historical and current threats and attacks against Israeli civilians led by state and non-state military organizations. However, the Israeli military response post 10/7—with the implicit or explicit approval and/or financial-military support of the major governments of Europe and North America—has reached a whole new level of death, destruction, and despair. Famine, disease, and displacement now plague Gaza and its inhabitants, not to mention the staggering death toll: conservative estimates at approximately 30,000, with other estimates reaching more than 70,000 by the time this volume is published. The IDF has dropped 70,000 tons of bombs on Gaza, more than the combined weight of bombs dropped on Dresden, London, and Hamburg in all of World War II.⁵²

The apparently indiscriminate killing of Gazan civilians—with the effective sanction of world leaders, notwithstanding rhetorical notes of sympathy and condemnation—brings new meaning to the question asked by Soheil Daulatzai and Junaid Rana, “Can the Muslim be human?” More precisely in this case, “Can the Palestinian be human?” (99% of Gazans are Muslim, with a small minority of Christians). Indeed, it is nearly impossible to understand the logic of such a campaign, the rationale of those in political power who tacitly support it, and the deafening silence of so many others. Impossible—unless echoes of St. Bernard’s counsel to the newly formed Knights Templar continues to reverberate in the halls of governments and military headquarters: we are not killing humans, we are killing evil—they are not even human, *they are nothing*.

In today’s polarizing discourse on this topic, it is easy to forget the historical entanglements of Islamophobia and antisemitism. In part, this is because the binary classification of peoples and groups remains the historical legacy of colonial epistemologies. In this binary, showing sympathy for Palestinians and demanding an end to the war implies support for Hamas’s 10/7 attack and for Israel’s annihilation; conversely, showing sympathy for the Israeli hostages and other victims of Hamas implies unqualified support for the continued annihilation of Gaza and its residents.

52. See Robert A. Pape, “Hamas Is Winning,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/middle-east-robert-pape>.

However, if we are to learn from the Indigenous knowledges expressed above, viz., the valorization of non-hierarchical, mutual relationships and systems, along with the subversion of binary modes of thinking, then this sort of dualistic and polarizing logic will likewise have to be upended. Iyad el-Baghdadi, a Palestinian human rights activist who was a stateless refugee for nearly 45 years, speaks of decolonization as the removal of supremacy, not merely the end of colonialism. Indeed, anti-colonial movements can easily become colonial themselves should they merely reverse the power dynamic and become supremacist in their own way. Instead, as the removal of supremacy, decolonization means “there’s no longer colonizer and colonized, there’s simply equal citizens in one state. This, of course, does not erase the inequities of the past, but this is the only light that can lead us towards the future.”⁵³ El-Baghdadi recognizes the deleterious consequences of binary thinking in which if one group “wins” the other utterly and abjectly “loses,” viz., “two peoples locked into a cycle of trauma, traumatizing each other, but also traumatized.” Again, he notes that decolonization is not the removal of people (in this case, Israelis), but rather “removal of domination” and the creation of collective liberation.⁵⁴

Decolonialism and decolonization are often misrepresented as simply power reversals—the colonizers are no longer in power and the formerly colonized have power. But as this chapter and el-Baghdadi’s points suggest, this is not an accurate representation:

Changing the world, this kind of decolonial vision ... [seeks to imagine and build a] mass movement premised upon equality, premised upon solidarity, and premised upon humanity. People are starting to think that there is no future in which a Jewish person and a Palestinian person can live together in peace in one country, but this is exactly why we have to double down on it. I don’t think I’m the one who’s dysfunctional for thinking that democracy and humanity is the only thing that can win. I really think that anybody who thinks that anything else can fix this is the one who’s dysfunctional.⁵⁵

Decolonial thinking and decolonial movements refuse to be reduced to binary thinking, and this is perhaps why authentic decolonial vision and praxis are difficult to accept for some who view the world in binaries. El-Baghdadi sharply makes this claim in the context of the ongoing Israeli military response in Gaza: “Ultimately, this is also about liberating Jewish

53. B. Gladstone and M. Loewinger (hosts), “What Does ‘Decolonization’ Mean in the Context of Gaza?” *On the Media*, WNYC Studios, March 8, 2024, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/what-it-means-decolonize-palestine-on-the-media>.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

Israelis. It's...about humanizing both the colonizer and the colonized... When I speak to my Jewish Israeli friends, they say that they are not free because they're living in this entity, which is always scared. If you have to kill that many people in order to feel safe, that means you're never going to feel safe."⁵⁶ El-Bagdadi is a Palestinian whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were expelled from Jaffa (now Tel Aviv) in 1948, and as such I have much to learn from his decolonial, Indigenous approach to liberation. He rejects binary logic because it merely perpetuates cycles of violence and trauma. This would likewise be the creative and liberating result of decolonial theology, comparative or otherwise—one that leads to decolonial praxis.

56. *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 7

ANTIFEMINISM AND ‘GENDER IDEOLOGY’— A GENEALOGY ON AN IMPORTANT PIECE OF ROMAN CATHOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Gunda Werner

In November 2022, the *Tagespost*, which is the mouthpiece of German-speaking conservative Catholics, made the connection among conservative Christian authors of all denominations apparent: There is a prevalent claim that gender theory is godless, atheistic; it manipulates language, subjugates people under an ideology and a gender logic. There is an impression that through gender thinking, “Man” creates himself in a godless autonomy. In such a scenario, the human being’s relationship to God is no longer in the center, not even in the center of the Catholics who are engaged in the synodal way. There is also a perception that gender thinking belittles the importance of love between man and woman, and instead merely values the “ethically to be formed relationship of the sexual partners among each other”—whereby it depends neither on the sexual orientation nor on the life in a marriage.¹ The core of the criticism of gender theories is linked solely to one name: Judith Butler. Critics claim that Butler’s gender theory is an attack on the idea of creation whereby God created man as man and woman. Behind this, even concerns about sexual orientation fall away. These gender-critical arguments move far beyond the Catholic context, and form a platform, a “symbolic glue”² for conservative currents and policies, which is one important reason why they should be taken seriously. Moreover, they serve further lines of argumentation that are fed by colonial forms of thought. Hence, a critical examination in a historical and postcolonial perspective is additionally important.

1. Stefan Hartmann, “Ist Gender-Denken für Christen akzeptabel?” *Tagespost*, Nov 20, 2022, <https://www.die-tagespost.de/kultur/ist-gender-denken-fuer-christen-akzeptabel-art-233687>.

2. Eszter Kováts and Maari Poim, eds., *Gender as a Symbolic Glue. The position and role of conservative and far right parties in the anti-gender mobilizations in Europe* (Budapest: FEPS and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/11382.pdf>.

First, I will trace indications of how much gender is at the center of right-wing populist Catholic currents, to then trace the deep currents of these phenomena in a threefold genealogy. The first can be seen in the intervention tactics of the Vatican since 1994, the second in the magisterial statements since the early 1970s, and third in the enduring entanglements of colonial thinking, effective from the 19th century to the present. At the end, a task description for a feminist-postcolonial theology is given with an annotated summary.³

1. Gender theory as the one theory and threat

Gender theories are being built up into a threat and it gives the appearance that they can act virtually on their own. Authors like Gabriele Kuby see gender ideology as a leaven that has leavened and destroyed the whole society.⁴ This core critique is solely the possibility of thinking gender identity beyond the binary of man and woman. Therein lies the openly transphobic attitudes that suspect arbitrariness and relativism in any change or questioning of sex and gender, which, moreover, is forced upon children and young people because they are indoctrinated from an early age. Other authors see in gender theories Marxism in a new guise, in which they want a unified society in which all natural differences of the sexes are leveled, freedom is invalidated, and Christianity is destroyed once again. This makes it necessary to stand up for traditional values and traditions, as the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2022 was able to show.⁵

These statements may seem exaggerated at first glance. However, in EU alone, the study, “Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009-2018” shows that of the 120 listed groups that oppose gender-specific issues in Europe, i.e. abortion, rights of LGBTIQ* movement and gender equality policies, 54 groups could be analyzed in their financial flows.⁶

3. Large parts of this contribution are based on my research in recent years. I will indicate in each case where they can be found.

4. Gabriele Kuby, *Die globale sexuelle Revolution: Zerstörung der Freiheit im Namen der Freiheit*, 6th edition (Kissleg: Fe-Medienverlag, 2016).

5. Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess, Aylene Heller, and Elmar Brähler, eds., *Autoritäre Dynamiken in unsicheren Zeiten. Neue Herausforderungen – alte Reaktionen?* Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie (Gießen: Psychosozial Verlag, 2022) https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2022-11/decker-kiess-heller-braehler-2022-leipziger-autoritarismus-studie-autoritaere-dynamiken-in-unsicheren-zeiten_0.pdf.

6. Neil Datta, *Tip of the Iceberg. Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009 – 2018* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, 2021), <https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Tip%20of%20the%20Iceberg%20June%202021%20Final.pdf>.

The result: “During the period [2009–2018], \$81.3 million came from the United States, \$188.2 million from Russia, and \$437.7 million from the European Union. Money from the EU more than tripled over 10 years. During that time, antifeminist organizations opened offices near European institutions, new online platforms emerged, and initiatives networked transnationally.”⁷ Among the groupings, for example, is “Tradition, Family, Property” (TFP), an internationally operating group originally founded in Brazil. This group sees seeking to warn the Catholic population against the so-called tricks of pro-abortion and homosexuality advocates as one of its goals in advocating its own causes in public appearances. Although the group has only a few followers, they are still influential due to having rich donors and political influence. Not only have they had more than 110 million euros at their disposal for their campaigns in the period under study, but they have also demonstrated their political influence. The enforcement “of the de facto abortion ban in Poland” in which the group was involved can be added here.⁸ David Paternotte’s investigations of the mass protests in France in 2012 and 2014 suggest similar structures and themes.⁹ Paternotte draws attention to the fact that the 2014 demonstrations were directed against gender: “People are now demonstrating against an academic concept, which is equated with an insidious ideology.”¹⁰ Paternotte shows that these demonstrations, gotten beyond France by the organizing group “la Manif pour Tous,”¹¹ are significant across national borders in their networking, which is successful in part because Catholic people are engaged and can easily network. However, he can also place these demonstrations on the timeline of the Catholic countermovement to gender equality and women’s rights.¹² Neil Datta reconstructs the ecumenical dimension as conservative Christians join internationally to act against gender, women’s rights, abortion, and equalizing queer people. “First developed by Vatican thinkers, the anti-gender toolkit proved attractive to other conservative Christian denominations. Rallying around the anti-gender project offered religious actors of different, at times competing or historically hostile, denominations an opportunity

7. Luise Strothmann, “Geld gegen Feminismus,” *Taz*, June 15, 2021, <https://taz.de/Analyse-von-Finanzstroemen/!5778776/>.

8. *Ibid.*

9. David Paternotte, “Blessing the Crowds. Catholic Mobilisations against Gender in Europe,” in *Anti-Genderism. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, ed. Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 129–147.

10. *Ibid.*, 129.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 133–139.

to come together and defend perceived common values. For many, it offered an opportunity to create a new, alternative form of ecumenism from the one offered by the World Congress of Churches, which some actors—for example, the Holy See and the ROC—saw as having become too progressive.”¹³

These connections and groupings, although eclectically pointed out here, have one thing in common: they see gender as a reason, resource, and trigger for processes that are understood as an impossible development in the eyes of conservative to right-wing populists. In addition, they understand their involvement as a Catholic missionary statement which could again recenter catholic faith in a secular society. “They bring Catholicism back into the public space and symbolize attempts by the Catholic Church to remain a significant political actor in a highly secularized Europe.”¹⁴ It is easy to see how magisterial statements have a significant effect and contribution here. The post-synodal letter *Querida Amazonia* (QA) presented on February 2, 2020, again illustrates the traditional line of Roman pronouncements in speaking about “the” woman and her special dignity or position in the church. The arguments in numbers 99–104 are exactly the same arguments that have already been underlined in the various Roman documents since 1973: that the woman has a special dignity and therefore task and role, imitates Mary in it and not Christ, and therefore cannot take over the tasks and roles of men. The topicality of the question, therefore, on which theological foil Roman documents write about women in general and thus implicitly or explicitly about gender, is and remains topical also in the present pontificate. This is also shown by the letter *As Man and Woman he created them* written by the Congregation for Catholic Education, presented to the public on June 9, 2019, regarding a dialogue with gender theory, which refers to an understanding of gender that has been discussed since 1995. This publication again passes on unchanged the two prominent contentious issues that have been the subject of magisterial pronouncements since Vatican II and increasingly since the mid-1990s: First, concern for a gender-differentiated society, and second, adherence to the ontological complementarity of man and woman, with its ecclesial as well as social consequences. The Roman understanding of gender itself, contained in the official magisterial documents, was formed by the confrontation with the UN Conference on Population in Cairo in 1994 and the UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

13. Datta, *Tip of the Iceberg*, 49.

14. Paternotte, “Blessing the Crowds,” 143.

2. Genealogies of roman catholic anthropology

2.1 *The Vatican and gender-mainstreaming*

Studies show that one of the roots of the current backlash against feminist rights and gender theories can be found in specific interventions and critiques of the feminist movement by the Vatican. The major UN conferences in 1994/1995¹⁵ can be described as key milestones in feminist theological research.¹⁶ They constitute a turning point in the landscape of religious policy, with the Vatican using its status as non-member state to advocate its own magisterial line while convincing others of it at the same time. The status as non-member state means that the Vatican has both voting and vetoing rights in the Assembly. The interventions by the Vatican in the run-up to the 1994 UN Conference in Cairo can be described in three ways.¹⁷ First: diplomatic attempts to convince other states of its own position. Second: active participation at the three prep conferences and putting points of contention in square brackets.¹⁸ Third: the activities in the run-up to the conference also included a PR publication by the Vatican that was received as a “fiery crusade,” namely portraying the UN conference as the destroyer of the family.¹⁹

15. This refers to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995).

16. In my publication Gunda Werner, *Judith Butler und die Theologie der Freiheit* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021; in English forthcoming), I have presented these genealogies in length.

17. Yasmin Abdullah, “The Holy See at United Nations Conference: State or Church?” *CLR* 96, no. 7 (1996): 1835–1875; see also: Paternotte, “Blessing the Crowds”; Mary Anne Case, “Trans Formations in the Vatican’s War on ‘Gender Ideology,’” *Chicago Unbound Journal Articles* (2019): 639–664, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/journal_articles/9669, here 640, 645; Sara Gabaguoli, “Against the Heresy of Immanence: Vatican’s ‘Gender’ as a New Rhetorical Device Against the Denaturalization of the Sexual Order,” *Religion & Gender* 6 no. 2 (2016): 187–204, doi: <http://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10156>, here 190; Mary Anne Case, “The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican’s Anathematization of Gender,” *Religion & Gender* 6, no. 2 (2016): 155–172, doi: <http://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10124>; Gerhard Marschütz, “Erstaunlich schlecht – die katholische Gender-Kritik,” in *Gender – Theorie oder Ideologie? Streit um das christliche Menschenbild*, ed. Thomas Laubach (Freiburg et al.: Herder, 2017), 99–118, here 109–110; David M. Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology. The New Science of Mind* (London: Routledge, 1998), 343.

18. Cf. Abdullah, “The Holy See at United Nations Conference,” 1848 et seq. There was great uproar at the pre-conference in April 1994, resulting in more than 100 points having to be put in square brackets. By expressing dissension with the document being voted on, any consensual paper as preparation document for the Assembly was thus already prevented in advance.

19. Cf. *ibid.*, 1848 et seq., and 1845–1847 (here again in summary): These interventions include a letter to all leading heads of state warning them of the conference’s resolutions, together with verbal attacks on the USA’s position with regard to abortion as well as an attempted alliance with Islamic countries to assert the Vatican’s own opinion; also Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 343.

The Vatican used its position at the conference to effectively block those positions that differ from its own doctrine. In the end, the Vatican voted in favor of the paper to the extent that the reservations were named in the appendix, demonstrating a non-consensual voting.²⁰

Given the massive critique of the Vatican's interventions, the Vatican's participation in the *Fourth World Conference on Women* in Beijing in 1995 was prepared with greater sensitivity to escalation.²¹ Nevertheless, the Vatican also devised two new strategies in addition to those mentioned above. First: Pope John Paul II wrote a letter in advance to all women, and second, he appointed law professor Mary Ann Glendon to lead the Vatican delegation.²² The Beijing Conference in 1995 was in fact the historical moment at which critique of the gender notion was officially put into words.²³ The gender notion was a purely legal one so that it is not possible to refer to this as a reception of Judith Butler.²⁴ Here again, the Vatican formally adopted the declaration of Beijing, while once more amending the document with restrictions and rejections, with a special emphasis on the notion of gender.²⁵

20. Cf. Abdullah, "The Holy See at United Nations Conference," 1851 et seq.; Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 343; Case, "Trans Formations," 664.

21. Abdullah, "The Holy See at United Nations Conference," 1852 et seq.; Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 350 et seq.

22. Pope John Paul II, "Letter of John Paul II to Women," June 29, 1995, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/de/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html; Abdullah, "The Holy See at United Nations Conference," 1853; Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 345.

23. There are countless publications on the notion of gender. It is worth mentioning that the notion is not used in the third edition of the LThK (Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, Lexicon of Theology and the Church). It was introduced as early as at the end of the 1990s to differentiate sex and gender as categories, cf. Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender. On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Science House, 1968); it sees extensive use as such despite the regular synonymous use, as stated by Case, "The Role of the Popes," 157. For a very fundamental analysis see, Monique Scheer, "Das Medium hat ein Geschlecht. Fünf Thesen zum besonderen Verhältnis zwischen Frauen und 'angemäßer Heiligkeit' aus kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht," in "Wahre" und "falsche" Heiligkeit. *Mystik, Macht und Geschlechterrollen im Katholizismus des 19. Jahrhunderts. Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien 90*, ed. Hubert Wolf (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013), 169–192, here 173–176, 185–186.

24. Annex IV in the Beijing Report provides the definition of the notion used at the conference, see United Nations, Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4-15 September 1995 (New York: United Nations, 1996), 218, <https://www.un.org/women-watch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf>; see also Case: 2019, 642, 654 et seq.; Gabaguoli, "Against the Heresy," 192.

25. Cf. Abdullah, "The Holy See at United Nations Conference," 1854; Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 345, 348; Case, 2019, 643; Ilse Lenz, "Geschlechterkonflikte um Gender und Gleichstellung," in *Gender – Theorie oder Ideologie? Streit um das christliche Menschenbild*, ed. Thomas Laubach (Freiburg et al.: Herder, 2017), 27–47, here 32 et seq.

The conference in Beijing is also relevant because of the specific constructs devised there that have been in effect since then. On the one hand, the idea was developed that feminist gender theories lead to a new colonialism that poor countries would not understand and could not live with.²⁶ On the other hand, a “Catholic” image of women was constructed as a kind of summary of prevailing ontological convictions. It reveals an amazing continuity with the texts that commented negatively on women and feminism before 1995, reiterating and expanding this after 1995 under the generic term “gender.”²⁷ The magisterial documents pertinent for corresponding analysis are *Inter Insigniores* (1976), *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), the *Letter to Women* (1995), the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (2004) and *Amores Laetitia* (2016), *Male and Female he created them* (2019) as well as *Querida Amazonia* (2020).

2.2 *The argumentation: binary genders with their own qualities.*

In the preparatory run-up to the Beijing conference, John Paul II wrote the *Letter to Women*, which acts as a hinge between *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) of 1988 and the *Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women* (Letter I) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of 2004. In all these letters, the dignity of women is a central theme.

The reasoning of these documents is well-known: women, endowed with special dignity, have as much a share in the image of God as men. However, the talk of the equal dignity of women does not lead to the legal equality of men and women. This thinking is very clearly summarized in the paper of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, entitled, *Letter on the Cooperation of Men and Women*. The document claims that manhood and womanhood are different from the beginning but belong ontologically equally to creation. This means that from there—and only

26. Since then, this idea of arbitrariness is an integral part of the Catholic narrative. Cf. among others Regina Ammicht Quinn, “Gender: Aufregung um eine Analyse-kategorie (die meiner Großmutter vielleicht gefallen hätte),“ in *Gender – Theorie oder Ideologie? Streit um das christliche Menschenbild*, ed. Thomas Laubach, (Freiburg: Herder, 2017), 65–82, 75 et seq.; Mary Anne Case, “After Gender Destruction of Man? The Vatican’s Nightmare Vision of the ‘Gender Agenda’ for Law,” *Pace Law Review* 31, no. 3 (2011): 802–817, here 803, 807, 811–813; Case, “The Role of the Popes,” 155 et seq.; Case, “Trans Formations,” 643; Gabaglio, “Against the Heresy,” 190–193, 200; Mary Ann Glendon, *A Nation Under Lawyers: How the Crisis in the Legal Profession Is Transforming American Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

27. Congregation for Catholic Education, “*Male and female he created them.*” *Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education*, Vatican City, Feb 02, 2019, http://www.educatio.va/content/dam/cec/Documenti/19_0997_INGLESE.pdf.

from creation—a “deeper understanding of woman” in her role in society and the church emerges. Her role in society is now found in the role of a mother; this corresponds to her biological and psychological nature to such an extent that even women who work cannot escape this ontological basis, because the paper of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith expresses the conviction “that the overlapping of two activities—family and work —takes on different characteristics in women than in men. Therefore, the task arises of harmonizing legislation and the organization of work with the requirements of woman’s mission within the family” (Letter I, n. 13). The womanly being is a *Dasein-for-others*, something that can probably be found in men as well, in the image of God; however, women, because they are “more spontaneously” in accord with the values of devotion, service, submission, and care, would be a sign of these values in a special way (Letter I, n. 14).

The role of women in the church, the Pope said, is therefore marked by Mariology. “Even though these are attitudes that should characterize every baptized person, women are distinguished by the fact that they live these attitudes with particular intensity and naturalness. Thus women fulfill a role of the greatest importance in the life of the Church” (Letter I, n. 16). For this reason, women occupy an essential space in the church, even if priestly ordination is reserved exclusively to men (cf. Letter I, n. 16). However, this is not an arbitrariness or aversion to women: “The dignity of women is determined by the order of love, which is essentially an order of justice and charity” (MD, n. 29). In short, the argument is both Marian-based and Marian-structured: “The Church sees in Mary the most sublime expression of the ‘genius of woman’ and finds in her a source of never-ending inspiration”—so John Paul II in n. 10 of his Letter to Women (Letter II) 1995. But because the eschatological perspective is also at stake, it should not be a disadvantage for women to “also accept a certain difference in roles, insofar as this difference is not the result of arbitrary impositions but arises from the particular nature of being a man and a woman” (Letter II, n. 11). If Christ chose only men for the official priestly “ministry,” then this is not a disadvantage for women, but the possibility of presenting the way of salvation in and through the church as different-complementary, namely through “the ‘Marian’ and the ‘apostolic-Petrine’ principle” (Letter II, n. 11; cf. MD, n. 27).

a) *Marginalization strategy through the emphasis on dignity*

Probably the most succinct formulation for this marginalization is that of the “genius of woman,” which is first presented in *Mulieris Dignitatem* n. 18 and from there finds its way into magisterial documents. The genius

of woman is understood to be an ontological predestination, though not a biological determination, of women to motherhood as a far-reaching symbolism of a “special receptivity” (MD, n. 18) that characterizes womanhood and in which woman realizes herself. Because womanhood is ontologically and divinely characterized by the genuinely feminine determinations of motherhood such as welcoming, surrendering, taking back and nurturing, everything else—including the double identity of the working mother—is to be subordinated to it. Further, the Marian principle of mother and virgin provides a biblically and ontologically based limitation within the church. The reasoning goes for “not even his mother, so intimately connected with his mystery and whose exalted function is emphasized in the Gospels of Luke and John, was entrusted with the apostolic office” (*Inter Insigniores*, n. 2). The special gift of women results—again—in special rights and duties, but not in equal rights: “What would be discrimination in the state is considered in the church as a consequence of the magisterial anthropology of gender, which, according to the church’s self-understanding, is not mere opinion or even “invention” of the pope and bishops, but their spiritually gifted interpretation of God’s plan for woman and man.”²⁸ The post-synodal letter of Pope Francis again shows how current this argumentation is.

b) *Differential hermeneutic logic*

In a differential hermeneutical logic, the Roman documents state that only the mind enlightened and gifted by God can grasp the mystery expressed magisterially in the genius of woman and the impossibility of consecration.²⁹ This one is particularly striking because it takes the magisterial argument out of the secular one. This introduces a difference into the interpretation of man, woman, and the world that not only signifies different understandings, but is also underpinned by a fundamental difference of church and world. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, this argument is taken up and continued. The argument that is essential here is now connected, because this essence proper to the church must be grasped as such and for this grasping it must be precisely avoided that “criteria of understanding and evaluation that have nothing to do with it are transferred to this church—also as an ‘institution’ made up of people and incorporated into history” (MD, n. 27). This mysteriousness is always traced back to Mary as symbol and highest form. Any possibility of a dialogue and a

28. Bernhard Sven Anuth, “Gottes Plan für Frau und Mann. Beobachtungen zur lehramtlichen Geschlechteranthropologie,” in *Gender studieren. Lernprozess für Theologie und Kirche*, ed. Margit Eckholt (Ostfildern: Grunewald, 2017), 171–188, here 172.

29. Anuth, „Gottes Plan für Frau und Mann,“ 178–180.

further development is prevented from the outset by the non-responsibility of extra-ecclesiastical insights and categories. A hermeticism takes place, which opposes the ecclesiastical logic to the logic of the “world” and only in this way can pass off the marginalization of women as internal logical. The unenlightened mind will call this understanding oppression and discrimination with modern, democratic, or constitutional logic, but thereby miss the plan of salvation of God.

2.3 Colonial signatures in anthropological teaching

a) *Feminization of religion and Mary*

One ambivalence of the feminization of religion and the special role that Mary plays in the 19th century is that the cult of Mary was also quite attractive to men.³⁰ This is because Mary and the popular devotion associated with her could provide men a medium for (non-violent) resistance against state and police despotism.³¹ On the foil of the idea that—exaggeratedly expressed—the ideal type of man was the White, male, liberal-enlightened, science-believing citizen—a two-class society was formed at the confessional dividing line, which definitely contained all cultural-colonial ingredients. Therefore, it was possible to look down critically on the Mariological, clerical, feminized Catholic Church and its men,³² then Mary could paradoxically become a shield.³³ This is exactly what she was interpreted for from the mid-nineteenth century onward, and she certainly changed the understanding of Mary: namely, Mary became the patron saint of the Catholic against the world. A development that was later to be formulated magisterially by the Marian dogma in 1954. Moreover, these developments can be embedded in the intensifying “orientalization” of Catholicism in the long 19th century.³⁴ This formed in different intensities and interpretations, but all of them emphasize the basic tendency that

30. This is a shortened passage of a longer paper, see Gunda Werner, “Add Teresa of Avila and Stir”—Why Adding Women Does Not End Exclusion Mechanisms in (Theological) Science,” *Religions* 14, no. 11 (2023): 7–13, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111391>.

31. Carol Engelhardt Herringer, “Mary as Cultural Symbol in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 503–515, here 506; Tine van Osselaer, “Marian Piety and Gender: Marian Devotion and the ‘Feminization’ of Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 579–591, here 587.

32. Herringer, “Mary as Cultural Symbol,” 508.

33. Andreas Holzem, *Christentum in Deutschland 1550-1850. Konfessionalisierung - Aufklärung - Pluralisierung*, 2 vols (Paderborn/Munich/Vienna: Schöningh, 2015), 998, <https://doi.org/10.1515/hzhz-2016-0469>.

34. Cf. Werner, *Judith Butler und die Theologie der Freiheit*.

Catholics were to be civilized in order to complete nation-building.³⁵ Catholics could be placed on a lower cultural level.³⁶ For the progressive, liberal, and enlightened forces, the way in which Catholic popular piety was expressed, in particular the Holy Rock pilgrimage to Trier in 1844 and the increased Marian spirituality, became the focus of harsh criticism.³⁷ However, this form of religiosity was also criticized within the church because it did not want to conform to the ideal image of a Catholic reform, according to Luria, because there was a danger of a subjective religiosity that was difficult to control.³⁸ Having said this, Catholic religious women continued to be attractive because they were explicitly and largely exclusively perceived as sensual, exotic, and erotic at the same time. But they were also possible sources of religious madness that could be contagious, which is why they continued to be demonized. "Exceptional religious phenomena such as miraculous cures, stigmata, and ecstasy were pathologized and gendered. The high number of female *miraculéés* was regarded with suspicion and seemed to support the idea that these miraculous events were nothing more than the product of women's imagination and feeble nature."³⁹ Here we find again a gendering of the religious in the devaluation of female religiosity. Manuel Borutta emphasizes above all that logics can be found here that were developed and applied in colonization. The modern concept of culture is—according to Borutta—in itself already a concept of demarcation from the colony to be described as "other" and "foreign," which could only be colony as foreign. This concept was also applied to Catholicism.⁴⁰ Here we find mechanisms that today would be called postcolonial "othering" feeding into the cultural reservoir. Borutta refers here to the travel descriptions of Fridrich Nicolai, which have become stylistic. They are written in the style of non-European voyages of discovery, although he simply traveled and described southern Germany and Austria. These descriptions can certainly be understood, according to Borutta, as "inner-German colonial fantasy" and are marked by the essential signatures of the European Enlightenment.⁴¹ What is particularly exciting, however, is that the descriptions, and within them the judgments,

35. Cf. Manuel Borutta, *Antikatholizismus. Deutschland und Italien im Zeitalter der europäischen Kulturkämpfe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 151.

36. Van Osselaer, "Marian Piety and Gender," 583.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Keith P. Luria, "'Popular Catholicism' and the Catholic Reformation," in *Early Modern Catholicism. Essays in Honor of John W. O'Malley, S.J.*, ed. Kathleen M. Comerford and Hilmar M. Pabel (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 116.

39. Van Osselaer, "Marian Piety and Gender," 585.

40. Van Osselaer, "Marian Piety and Gender," 550.

41. Van Osselaer, "Marian Piety and Gender," 551.

include other characteristics that are mutually dependent: namely, race, class, and gender. The described ‘Nicolaeian’ Catholics do not appear as a purely confessional Catholic group, but as people of the lower classes and lewd women.⁴² The logic of these travel stories is extended to structural features of colonial ethnography, *firstly* through dehistoricization, in which the culture in question is described as static; *secondly*, through the exotification of the culture and thus interpreted as the Other of the enlightened Occident; *thirdly*, an essentialization occurs here, in that the foreign/Other is equated with nature.⁴³ These characteristics are now all applied to Catholicism, so that it could be understood as an inner colony of the Enlightenment. Beyond Borutta, it will be possible to say that women within Catholicism itself are now again constructed as a separate “colony,” only not with the need to enlighten them, but to tame them and classify them as subordinate within the framework of the dominant discourse.

b) *Gender differentiation as a colonial process*

This process of differentiation of gender relations with the attempt to further frame them within a dichotomy of inside-outside etc. is perceptible and effective far beyond the Catholic and German area. This is thus something that is inevitable for an understanding of the 19th century.⁴⁴ For something happens in the 19th and 20th centuries that initially fixes gender roles: “[...] when the stereotypical gender role became systematically connected to sexual differences and the distinction between the ‘rational man’ and the ‘emotional woman’ was seen as a scientific fact.”⁴⁵ According to theologian Carol Engelhardt Herringer, the understanding of man and woman changed from “different in degree” to “different in kind.”⁴⁶ For example, Peter Van der Veer can illustrate these shifts in his sociological-historical study of the importance of religion in Britain and India by describing the interdependence between the colony and the colonizers. In doing so, he marks the significance of gender in the relations of power.⁴⁷ Set in the Victorian period, women are characterized as the “angel in the house.”⁴⁸ The world is described as corrupt versus the perfect world of the

42. Van Osselaer, “Marian Piety and Gender,” 553.

43. Van Osselaer, “Marian Piety and Gender,” 557–558.

44. Carmen M. Mangion, “The ‘Mixed Life’: Challenging Understandings of Religious Life in Victorian England,” in *Gender, Catholicism and Spirituality. Women and the Roman Catholic Church in Britain and Europe 1200-1900*, ed. Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Carmen M. Mangion (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 165–179, here 170.

45. Van Osselaer, “Marian Piety and Gender,” 579.

46. Herringer, “Mary as Cultural Symbol,” 504.

47. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

48. Herringer, “Mary as Cultural Symbol,” 504.

family, which would henceforth be the firm foundation and protection of men standing in the hostile world.⁴⁹ This imagery and rhetoric will also inscribe itself in the Catholic Church. For example, Pope Benedict XV describes women as “soul of society,” the superior spiritual and moral force, and the social force of religion.”⁵⁰

Van der Veer reconstructs the emergence of what he calls “muscular” Christianity, which emphasizes the masculinity of Christianity in public. He elaborates on two ideas that provide the foil for a specific understanding not only of Christian masculinity but also of religiosity. First, the “Orient” is understood as feminine and contact with the ‘Orient’ could result in men being understood as feminine. Interestingly, this motif will reappear in the anti-Catholicism of the late 19th century. Van der Veer gives a nuanced account of how the patterns of Christian masculinity formed in opposition to Hindu masculinity.⁵¹ He describes this distinct masculinity from the need to arrive at a clearly circumscribed religious and national identity that included moral integrity. The issue of nation building is a recurring image that is framed in genderized and racialized categories. Among other things, certain sports were invented in order to escape the accusation of being feminine and at the same time to be clearly British, thus cricket or rugby as a “place of real Christian Salvation.”⁵² This also includes religious exercise such as that of the Boy-Scouts. The reconstruction of the uprising of 1857–1859 is of particular relevance, because there—according to Van der Veer—the circumscription of the endangered White woman by uncivilized non-White men was born. “It was their sexual violation of the ‘purity’ of the Victorian ‘angel in the house’ that unleashed a hysterical, sexualized, and racialized hatred against the Indian native.”⁵³ In colonial discourse, this was based on the need to assert one’s own moral strength and masculine power in the face of an untamable masculinity on the one hand, and an Orient understood as feminine (and subaltern therein) on the other.

The Catholic theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza put forward the thesis years ago that the privatization of religion caused the clergy to lose their privileged social position and were increasingly put on a par with the ladies of society.⁵⁴ According to Schüssler Fiorenza, this resulted in a need

49. Van Osselaer, 583–584.

50. Christine E. Gudorf, “Renewal or Repatriarchalization? Responses of the Roman Catholic Church to the Feminization of Religion,” *Horizons* 10, no. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 231–251, here 237. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900024002>.

51. Cf. van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters*.

52. *Ibid.*, 92.

53. *Ibid.*, 86.

54. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Die kritisch-feministische The*logie der Befreiung. Eine entkolonisierend-politische The*logie,” in *Politische Theologie. Neuere Geschichte und Potentiale*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Klaus Tanner, Michael Welker, with Johann Baptist

for an increased emphasis on masculinity, which—in her opinion—is still one of the reasons for the discussions about the admission of women to office today. The emerging discourses of masculinity, especially to a defamation of the feminine as a threat to the masculine, thus react to a certain feminization of the religious in the various cultural contexts.⁵⁵ A long history and a rich reservoir of knowledge could be drawn upon from this.

For the Catholic Church, this tension will become even more acute because of the strengthening ultramontane movement and the increasing *Kulturkampf*. From a Catholic point of view one can agree with the thesis of the feminization of the religious and thus of the counter-gendered spheres and areas of society, in all its ambivalences, on several levels. Not only initially on the factual level through the presence of women in the public sphere, but also through the symbolic and theological interpretation of Mary as the comprehensive image of femininity⁵⁶ and Catholicism, as it will then be reflected in the dogma of 1854. “Mary was the perfect vehicle for the forms of spirituality encouraged by the Catholic Reform, but she was also the most capable of divine intercessors, one to whom people could turn for help with all sorts of problems.”⁵⁷ The other side of this development is the far-reaching permanent suppression of women and the pushing back of women into the private sphere, the devaluation of the feminine while emphasizing the purity of female spirituality.⁵⁸ “The Roman Catholic Mary was an extension of the feminine ideal in that she was not just morally superior but free of original and actual sin.”⁵⁹ The Catholic Church will not get rid of the ambivalence in the image of women, which is further fueled by the exemplary character of Mary but will continue to emphasize it up to the present magisterial documents, namely whenever the special dignity of women is emphasized.

3. What can be discerned from this—a commentary in conclusion

It is only from the perspective of gender criticism, however, that the specific Christian conservative antifeminism can be discovered and understood: The source is the Bible, more precisely the story of the creation of man in Genesis/the First Book of Moses. Because God created man as man and

Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001), 23-39, here 35-36.

55. Van Osselaer, “Marian Piety and Gender,” 580.

56. Herringer, “Mary as Cultural Symbol,” 504.

57. Luria, “Popular Catholicism,” 119.

58. Cf. Luria, “Popular Catholicism,” 124.

59. Herringer, “Mary as Cultural Symbol,” 504.

woman (Gen 1:27) in a correspondence of sex and gender and because out of the respective male and female sexuality certain characteristics were laid out in man as specifically male and female wanted by God, therefore women were fixed to certain roles.

The role of “the” woman is concentrated on motherhood, caring for the family, because women can have children. Because women can have children and have been given this task by God, the nature of “the” woman is also characterized as serving, devoted and caring. This is not discrimination, especially in Catholic logic, but God’s special will of salvation and creation for women. There is the idea that there is a universal idea of “the” woman and what is good for “the” woman, what she needs and how she should best shape her life. This idea has been shaped during the colonial times in the 19th century and lasts until today! Exclusion from offices and public spheres, poorer educational opportunities and pay are accepted—especially when systemic reasons are responsible. This shows consequences especially in the Catholic imagination of pastoral care wherever these conditions are not considered. For then the fundamental asymmetry of pastoral settings becomes a highly vulnerable place, especially for women. A foreclosure and refusal of gender-theoretical and postcolonial insights regarding power relations does not lead anywhere here.⁶⁰ Here, the argumentation turns in circles: because the woman wants to be with the children as a mother and take care of the house, she can at most work part-time or put the family first in the consideration of priorities, even if she therefore earns less, does not have a career and has fewer opportunities, she still realizes her nature as a woman. The rejection of gender diversity reveals very clearly what is at stake. A feminist and postcolonial perspective has the task of analyzing theological topics in their justifications and historical constructions and in this way adding new ways of thinking both for the history of theology and for theological topics. Feminist-postcolonial theology searches for the forgiveness and entanglements in colonial and patriarchal systems in the past that continue to have an impact today—even where they are no longer charged with religious or theological meanings. This can be seen, for example, in gender theory, whose opponents use religious or theological arguments without naming their foundations, e.g. when it comes to bisexuality and the gender roles of “the” woman and “the” man. In this way, theology contributes to a feminist-postcolonial enlightenment project.

60. Cf. Gunda Werner, “Asymmetry in Confession as a Cause of Sexual and Spiritual Violence—Dogma Historical Resources for Making Changes to Confession in Terms of Clerical and Sacramental Theology,” *Religions* 13, no. 4 (2022): 307.

PART 2

THEORETICAL REFLEXIONS

CHAPTER 8

DECOLONIZING THEOLOGY: PATHWAYS TOWARDS LIBERATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

Stefan Silber

Kwok Pui-lan, a feminist and postcolonial theologian from Hong Kong, narrates in her book on *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* the story of a Chinese woman from the beginning of the 20th century.¹ That woman used a pin to cut out phrases and verses from the Bible. She wanted those verses to disappear, because in her judgment they should not be in it. Those were verses from the letters of Saint Paul in which—according to the traditional interpretation—“he instructed women to be submissive and remain silent in the church.”² The woman in this memory resisted to being submissive. She was silent, because her own culture and the colonial order demanded it, but she resisted with the means at her disposal, and she transformed the Bible into the book it should be; a document of liberation. Kwok comments: “this woman exercised the freedom to choose and reject what she thought was harmful for women.”³

This is a very good example to summarize the need, the praxis and the scope of decolonial transformation of Christian religion that I will deal with in this presentation: While in the past, Christianity served to legitimize and expand colonial rule, in the present—and according to the criteria of the colonized people themselves—it may and should be used as a tool for decolonial liberation. However, it requires a deep and often painful transformation to be able to assume this role. Academic theology wields a great responsibility to support this process of decolonial transformation.

This short presentation of decolonizing theologies will deal with the following topics. First, I am going to explain the concept of the *coloniality of theology*. Then, I proceed to present what I propose to identify as four *fundamental thrusts of postcolonial theologies*, namely discourse and epistemologies, power structures, resistance, and alternatives. I shall finish with some conclusions about how to decolonize theology.

1. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 77.

2. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 77.

3. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 77.

1. Coloniality of theology

Theology was an integral part of the colonial practice of Christianity. It served as a legitimization for colonization and imposed a specific European religious culture denigrating, alienating and trying to replace the local colonized cultures and religions.

Core elements of this legitimization were the theological concepts of mission, of a supposed divine mandate, fulfilled by a certain European empire or church, of the exclusive need of the (Catholic) Faith for salvation, of the diabolical origin of non-Christian religions, among many others. The cultural eurocentrism of the colonial project was replicated in a theological eurocentrism, according to which, both in the colonies and in the independent post-colonial republics, no other kind of theology could be taught than the European one.

European theology thus became the model of all theological production in the different local churches of the world. Not only Roman Catholic centralism claims to be able to define the totality of theology. Theology produced in Europe and in North America often does not take into account the contributions and criticisms from other parts of the world, and continues to claim that its own is a universal theology with validity and meaning for all contexts and all cultures. Theological education and reflection in all parts of the world would do well, in the opinion of European theology, if they only copied it.⁴

The difficulty in changing this eurocentrist attitude lies in the fact that the deep cultural convictions inherited by colonialism cannot be easily transformed. The Peruvian decolonial theorist Aníbal Quijano coined the concept of “coloniality of power”⁵ to describe the solidity of the convictions that legitimized colonialism and that remain active even after achieving national independence. In his own words, coloniality consists “in a colonization of the imaginary of the dominated. That is to say, it acts within that imaginary. To some extent, it is part of it.”⁶ Edgardo Lander extends the Quijanian concept of the coloniality of power to the epistemological and academic field, speaking of the “coloniality of knowledge.”⁷

4. Josef Estermann, *Südwind. Kontextuelle nicht-abendländische Theologien im globalen Süden* (Zürich/Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2017), 158.

5. Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad,” *Perú indígena* 13, no. 29 (1992): 11.

6. Quijano, “Colonialidad,” 12.

7. Edgardo Lander, *La colonialidad del saber. Eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas Latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000).

Following Quijano and Lander, we can also speak of the coloniality of theology.⁸ Not only the contents of theology, but also the methods, didactic concepts and the academic system itself introduced by European colonists and missionaries continue to be dominated by coloniality. Little by little, in the last four decades, and not everywhere at the same time and in the same way, decolonial resistance and the desire to construct different theologies and modes of teaching are emerging that can counteract these effects of theological coloniality.

For Latin America, Liberation Theology was (and still is) the most important and powerful decolonial movement. Since the 1990s, several waves of feminist theologies have transformed the practice of Liberation Theology, criticized and transformed, in turn, by Indian and Afro-American Theologies, Queer Theology and other theological currents critical of coloniality. In this way, a variety of simultaneous and interrelated processes of a decolonial transformation of theology in Latin America can now be observed.⁹ Similar processes have taken place in almost every region of the world.

In Europe, however, these transformations have generally not been acknowledged so far. With very few exceptions,¹⁰ most European theological production turns its back on the problem of coloniality and the decolonial turn of theology in Latin America and in other parts of the world. The decolonial critique of theology, however, is not only extremely urgent for the so-called “Theologies of the South,”¹¹ but also needs to be assumed by the theologies of the colonial metropolises and their modes of teaching, to detect and more effectively transform colonial residues in theology.

However, in the eagerness to learn from decolonial criticism, the danger of what Canadian Indigenous sociologist Leanne Betasamosake

8. Stefan Silber, *Postcolonial Theologies. An Introduction* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 95–99.

9. See for this variety of transformations and articulations: Oscar Elizalde Prada et al., eds., *Iglesia que camina con Espíritu y desde los pobres. Talleres y Comunicaciones Científicas* (Montevideo: Amerindia, 2017); Josef Estermann, “La transformación intercultural de la teología de la liberación. Ruptura epistemológica e irrupción de lo indígena,” *Alternativas* 19, no. 44 (2013): 129–158; Nicolás Panotto, *Descolonizar o saber teológico na América Latina. Religião, educação e teologia em chaves pós-coloniais* (São Paulo: Recriar, 2019); Daylins Rufin Pardo and Luis Carlos Marrero, eds., *Re-encantos y Re-encuentros. Caminos y desafíos actuales de las Teologías de la Liberación* (La Habana: CMI, 2017).

10. See, among others, Estermann, *Südwind*; Andreas Nehring and Simon Tielech, “Theologie und Postkolonialismus. Zur Einführung,” In *Postkoloniale Theologien. Bibelhermeneutische und kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge*, ReligionsKulturen 11, ed. Andreas Nehring and Simon Tielech (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 9–45; Stefan Silber, *Poscolonialismo. Introducción a los estudios y las teologías poscoloniales. El tiempo que no perece* 3 (Cochabamba: Itinerarios, 2018); Juan José Tamayo, *Theologien des Südens. Dekolonisierung als neues Paradigma*, Theologien der Welt 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 2020).

11. Tamayo, *Theologien des Südens*.

Simpson calls “cognitive extractivism”¹² arises. In her conception, the attitude of appropriating Indigenous ways of thinking without asking for permission, without accrediting it and with the aim of using them for economic ends, is similar to the destructive effect of mining or logging extractivism. “Extracting is stealing,” says Simpson.¹³ Decolonial learning can only be carried out from a “deep reciprocity,”¹⁴ if the danger of cognitive extractivism is to be avoided.

The decolonial turn in European theology and theological education therefore requires this double challenge: recognize colonialism and coloniality within one’s own academic tradition and present, and avoid the easy appropriation of different knowledge systems that survive in countries already plundered by colonialism. The decolonial turn threatens to become a neocolonial temptation, this time epistemic. It is necessary, therefore, to develop at the same time what Swiss theologian Joseph Estermann calls “an epistemological act of humility.”¹⁵

2. Fundamental thrusts of postcolonial theologies

Postcolonial theologies cover a wide range of problems and challenges and present different perspectives of approach, which is why it seems fair to me to differentiate these perspectives in four fundamental thrusts or perspectives. These are no separate ways of decolonizing theology, one depends on the others, and each of them needs an interdisciplinary and intersectional framework. The need to decolonize theology lies in the coloniality of both its discourses, concepts and epistemologies (2.1) as well as its power structures and ways of using them (2.2). It is necessary to pay attention to and accept as justified the attitudes and acts of resistance that theology encounters in the exercise of both its teaching and ecclesial practices (2.3) and it must be open to learning from theological alternatives that are produced in other parts of the world (2.4) so that it can sincerely contribute to the decolonial liberation carried out by the previously colonized peoples.

2.1 *Discourse and epistemologies*

“I am black, but comely,” (Song 1:5) says an anonymous woman in the biblical book of the Song of Songs. At least, she seems to say this or

12. Ramón Grosfoguel, “Del extractivismo económico al extractivismo epistémico y ontológico,” *Revista Internacional de Comunicación y Desarrollo* 4 (2016): 33–45.

13. Grosfoguel, “Del extractivismo,” 42.

14. Simpson, quoted by Grosfoguel, “Del extractivismo,” 41.

15. Estermann, *Südwind*, 158.

something similar, if we consult the King James Version of the text or many other English translations.¹⁶ The Jerusalem Bible translates in full verse: “I am black but lovely, daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the pavilions of Salmah.”¹⁷ The Song of Songs is a collection of erotic poems, and the protagonist of this poem seems to oppose her black or brown complexion to her own beauty: although she has black complexion, she considers herself as beautiful.

However, one glimpse at the original Hebrew text informs us that there is no contradiction here: “I am black and beautiful,” the text says literally. The adversative translation is not present in the original intention of the poem: the woman who recites it is dark-skinned and beautiful, and she knows it.

Maricel Mena-López, Claudia Pilar de la Calle and Loida Sardiñas Iglesias denounce the wrong translation of the text that conveys a false image of self-esteem of this biblical woman. In the footnote of the Jerusalem Bible, in its Brazilian version of 1998, they find a commentary that makes this falsification even worse. This footnote explains about the woman who sings this song: “She has a tanned complexion from the field work she was forced to do, and she is compared to the Bedouin’s black tents, woven from goat hair. The ancient Arab poets oppose the light complexion of girls of good birth (here the daughters of Jerusalem) to the male and female slaves involved in outdoor work.”¹⁸

The text of the poem, however, says nothing about a supposed light complexion of well-born girls, nor does it hint at a supposed bad birth of beautiful black women. The characterization of the poem’s protagonist as a slave also stems from the (colonial, White, and supposedly patriarchal) imagination of the authors of this commentary.

This is a good example of the power of colonial concepts in theology. The colonial practice of enslaving people of brown and black complexion becomes a racist concept that remains active even centuries after independence and the abolition of slavery. This concept not only implies the inferiority of these people considering their beauty as an exception. While the Jerusalem Bible commentary reproduces this racist and colonial attitude more or less openly, it is better hidden in the translation of the biblical text. Behind the apparently innocent word “but,” however, appears the entire racist colonial abyss that can serve as the basis for the continuing

16. Compare, e.g., “I am very dark, but lovely” (ESV); “my skin is dark but lovely” (NIRV); “Dark am I, yet lovely” (NIV).

17. See <https://morningstarinfosys.com/song-of-songs/>.

18. Maricel Mena-López et al., “Bíblia e descolonização. Leituras desde uma hermenêutica bíblica negra e feminista de libertação,” *Mandrágora* 24, no. 2 (2018): 134.

practices of racist domination and endanger the self-esteem of People of Color, especially women.

The three researchers add another example that demonstrates how colonial concepts can serve to further devalue people already subordinated by coloniality. In an interpretation of the Song, Origenes, theologian of the third century, compares the protagonist of the poem to the soul and writes that she is “black because of the disgrace of her race, but beautiful because of penance and faith”; “black because of sin, but beautiful because of penance and the fruits of penance.”¹⁹ The negative characterization of the “black and beautiful” woman can also be used on a metaphorical level to oppose the beauty of the soul in penance and faith and the blackness of the soul in sin. From this metaphorical comparison, it is easy to reach the conclusion that people of dark skin are more affected by sin and therefore require the domination of White people to achieve penance.

Fr. Antonio Horner, German missionary of the nineteenth century, expressed this clearly, using another distorted biblical interpretation, according to which the population of Africa was cursed by Noah: “[p]opulated by Cham, Noe’s second son, that continent is still under the heavy pressure of the father’s curse. [...] The black color of the descendants of Chanaan still testifies to the fact that their race was struck by the wrath of heaven, from the beginning.”²⁰

These examples show the power of theological discourses and concepts affected by coloniality until the very present times. Decolonial criticism needs to deconstruct this epistemic violence in order to construct a liberating theology that corresponds to the gospel of Jesus and to the sufferings of our times.

2.2 Power structures

Musa Dube, feminist biblical scholar from Botswana, recounts a popular tale that is also told in a similar way in other countries: “When the white man came into our land, he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, ‘Let us pray.’ After prayer, the white man had the land, and we had the Bible.”²¹ The story reflects a painful experience made by many peoples for centuries. Dube’s parents themselves suffered the theft of their

19. Mena-López et al., “Biblia,” 134.

20. Quoted by Richard Hölzl, “Rassismus, Ethnogenese und Kultur. Afrikaner im Blickwinkel der deutschen katholischen Mission im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert,” *Werkstatt-Geschichte* 59 (2012): 12–13.

21. Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 3.

land by the British colonizers and had to take refuge in the neighboring country. Chris Budden, an Australian theologian of European ancestry, confesses when analyzing the consequences of colonialism: “The relationship between the two peoples began in theft. The European invaders drove people from their land, destroyed their homes and sources of food, denied them access to sacred sites and their connected stories, and in the process undermined the sociality at the heart of identity.”²²

This theft could be carried out in different ways: From a “purchase” imposed at prices dictated by the invaders, through deception, false titles, expropriation, slavery on their own lands, to violent expulsion and genocide, the conquerors used a variety of methods to appropriate invaded lands.²³ The Bible and other religious and theological tools served both as divine legitimization for the expropriation and as a commodity of exchange in the sense of Dube’s tale: receiving faith in the true God was considered, by the invaders, sufficient compensation for the loss of the land.

However, many authors draw attention to the fact that only the European invaders could conceive of the land as a commodity: in the Indigenous worldviews of many peoples, the land cannot have an owner, because it is itself sacred, or is communal and not individual property. Some Indigenous peoples conceive of the land not as a geographical extension, but as a network of trails and path; it makes no sense to attribute ownership to it. Others relate it to the ancestors or to local spirits. Budden notes that “the Aboriginals were part of the land and it was part of them. When they lost their land, they lost themselves.”²⁴ If there exists an intimate reciprocity between land and peoples that is sacred, you simply cannot sell or leave your land. The imposition of a European concept of land—economic, legal, geometric—allows the appropriation of foreign land and at the same time causes the destruction of their cultures by taking away a fundamental element.

The Bible, however, can be an instrument of resistance against this theft: Ezra Chitando, from Zimbabwe, reads the story of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kgs 21:1–19) in this sense. King Ahab wants to take away from Naboth a piece of land. Naboth, however, replies to the king: “The LORD forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee” (1 Kgs 21:3; KJV). Jezebel, the queen, however, orchestrates a false

22. Chris Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space. Doing Theology on Aboriginal Land* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), 20.

23. Susan Healy, “Settler Christianity and the Taking of Māori Land,” in *Listening to the People of the Land. Christianity, Colonisation and the Path to Redemption*, ed. Susan Healy (Auckland: Pax Christi Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019), 73–95.

24. Budden, *Following Jesus*, 21.

accusation against Naboth to have him condemned to death, and take the land with violence. Chitando comments that “Naboth was convinced that his inheritance could not be commodified and given away, as it was from his ancestors.”²⁵ The biblical text can serve as a mirror to analyze the violent and criminal attitude of the conquerors and to resist the loss of the land. In the words of South African theologian Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, one can “use the Bible to get the land back and get the land back without losing the Bible.”²⁶

The expropriation of the land is just one example of the persistence of coloniality in power structures, be they economic, legal, political, academic, religious or others. Since colonial times, the forms of exercising power have been transformed and, in many cases, camouflaged with discursive methods. However, it is very characteristic of a post-colonial context that it continues to suffer from power structures that are unjust and difficult to change. Decolonial analysis can help uncover them and study strategies of resistance.

2.3 *Resistance*

Unmasking coloniality is already an important first step in the decolonial task. The critical and in-depth analysis of camouflaging discourses and power structures that perpetuate colonial subordination opens the way to a strategic resistance against colonial residues in today’s culture. Acts and attitudes of resistance took place since the beginning of colonization, sometimes more openly and sometimes less. Through decolonial critique, however, it is possible to deploy resistance efforts more specifically. Theological resources can also be used in this sense, as we already saw with an example of the study of the Bible in the previous paragraph.

Laura Donaldson, a decolonial academic in the US, gives an instructive example of anticolonial resistance: a French missionary from colonial North America in the seventeenth century reports his encounters with a woman from the Mi’kmaq nation who owned a cross of Indigenous design featuring patterns, figures, and symbols of her Native religion. The woman revered this cross as a Christian symbol as well, and she displayed it prominently in her home. In their meetings, “she placed it usually

25. Ezra Chitando, “The Bible as a Resource for Development in Africa. Ten Considerations for Liberating Readings,” in *Religion and Development in Africa. Bible in Africa Studies 25*, ed. Ezra Chitando et al. (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2020), 404.

26. Quoted by Bill Ashcroft, “Threshold Theology,” in *Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies. Storyweaving in the Asia-Pacific*, Postcolonialism and Religions, ed. Mark Brett and Jione Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 5.

between her and the French, obliging them to make their prayers before her cross, whilst from her side she made her own prayers, according to her custom, before her King of Hearts and her other Divinities.”²⁷

Donaldson refers to the Mi’kmaw woman’s “double cross”²⁸ in a twofold meaning: the *double cross* is at the same time a *double deceit*, because from her own perspective the cross with Indigenous symbols is a place of Indigenous religious practice. The French missionaries and settlers, who knelt in front of the *double cross* to pray, had to kneel at the same time in front of the woman behind her cross. Through the shift in perspective, Donaldson is able to identify this ambiguity and the covert resistance of the Mi’kmaw woman.

Identifying these acts of resistance helps to see colonial subalterns as something different from passive victims. Although they seem to agree to their subordination, it is possible that they practice resistance in a camouflaged way to protect themselves. Within the history of evangelization and mission, many similar acts can be recognized, which can nurture creativity in resistance to the present. It is most helpful to recur to the post-colonial concept of hybridity proposed by Indian academic Homi Bhabha. Many colonial religious practices reflect the power of resistance represented by hybridity and mimicry.²⁹

Donaldson goes beyond these camouflaged strategies in another example: she interprets the biblical book of Ruth as the story of a woman (Ruth) who crosses cultural and political boundaries to submit to the patriarchal culture of her mother-in-law and her future husband. In contrast to her, Orpah, her mother-in-law’s other daughter-in-law, refuses to leave her culture and returns to her mother’s house (cf. Ruth 1:6–14). According to its Hebrew root, Orpah’s name means “neck” or “back.” For Donaldson, this name clearly alludes to Orpah’s resistance against assuming the perspective of the dominant culture and patriarchy. Orpah is, in this interpretation of Donaldson, for Native American readers the heroine of the narrative, “because she does not reject her own traditions and her sacred ancestors.”³⁰

Changing perspectives and rejecting certain perspectives, are two strategies of resistance against theological coloniality. The decolonial critique

27. Laura E. Donaldson, “Native Women’s Double Cross. Christology from the Contact Zone,” *Feminist Theology* 10, no. 29 (2002): 100.

28. Donaldson, “Native Women’s Double Cross,” 100.

29. Cf. Dietmar Müßig, *Die Jungfrau im Silberberg. Ein kolonialzeitliches Marienbild aus Potosi als Zeugnis andiner Theologie*, Weltkirche und Mission 13 (Regensburg: Pustet 2020).

30. Laura E. Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes,” in *Ruth and Esther, A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, second series 3, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 143.

can identify other strategies of resistance that show that the subalterns are not victims without possibilities of action. It is one task of postcolonial theology to make these margins of resistance visible and practicable.

2.4 *Alternatives*

The European epistemic universe does not easily admit alternatives. The alleged universality of European science and scholarship remains engraved in the coloniality of knowledge of contemporary academic practices. Affirming the existence of alternatives and drawing attention to the differences between traditional European knowledge and alternative knowledges already constitutes an act of resistance and can be interpreted as rebellion.

Latin American theology, in recent decades, has already developed a wide range of different theologies that have assumed alternative knowledge to develop new theological responses to current challenges. Liberation Theology, Latin American theological feminism, Indian and Afro-American theologies, and the various intersections between these theological currents demonstrated at the same time that dialogue with alternative knowledges can lead to disagreement and even conflict with academic and ecclesiastical authorities. Despite the fact that in many cases the label of the decolonial turn has not been accepted in these theological currents up till now, it is obvious that the practices of unmasking the discursive and power structures that impede freedom and justice are inscribed in postcolonial strategies which seek the deconstruction of coloniality.

For a decolonial reconstruction and transformation of theology, the worldviews of cultures that have been marginalized, devalued, and neglected by colonialism are of vital importance. Through processes of resistance and negotiation during the last five centuries, this knowledge, albeit delegitimized by colonialism, continues to be valid up to the present in many marginal spaces, such as rural areas, the Indigenous peoples, and popular and suburban spaces, among others. Indigenous people have already begun to develop theological movements that emerge from the life experiences of Indigenous cultures and religions, at times under the name of Indigenous theology. It does not propose a return to a pre-colonial religiosity or culture, but seeks dialogue with the cultural expressions of current spirituality in order to deconstruct religious coloniality. In recent years, for instance, the Indigenous conviction of the interrelatedness of everything created has gained increasing strength in the recreation of an ecological theology that can counteract the disastrous environmental

effects of global neoliberalism.³¹ In this interpretation of the natural, everything is interconnected; each being is an element of a great living organism that depends on each one of them. Human beings are part of this great network of living connections. European cosmology, however, is based on the difference and even the separation between the subject and the object, which gives the subject (White, male, dominant, etc.) the opportunity and the legitimacy to exploit the objects according to their own interests. Neoliberal extractivist practices are based precisely on this kind of epistemology.

We can observe at a global level that some ecological theologies already begin to assume Indigenous thought and relate it to other Indigenous concepts such as “buen vivir”—good living—the common home, the land without evil, the rights of the earth and others.³² The plurality of Indigenous conceptions about the relationships between all beings does not hinder the construction of alternatives to European thought, but supports it. Since from different points of view and for the sake of different objectives, both criticism of colonial epistemology as well as the construction of liberating theological projects can be made possible.

The openness to decolonial alternatives allows dialogue and interrelation with other alternatives, such as feminism and queer theologies, ecofeminism, and popular Afro-American and interreligious theologies. Theological resistance to coloniality and the turning away from traditional theological thinking opens spaces for alternatives of content and methodology that can be found in the spiritual experiences of the believers and can be constructed into new, postcolonial theologies. This reflects an idea of decolonial thinker Walter D. Mignolo who characterizes the decolonial turn as “detachment and openness”³³: to break away from coloniality permits to open up one’s ways of reflection to epistemological alternatives, for the benefit of subaltern majorities and all beings on the planet.

3. Decolonizing theology: Conclusions

“Decolonizing theology” can have a double meaning: if we decolonize theology, it can become a tool for decolonizing. In my opinion, both

31. Víctor Bascopé, *Espiritualidad originaria en el Pacha Andino. Aproximaciones teológicas* (Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2006), 1–16.

32. Stefan Silber, *Ökologie und Postkolonialismus*, Theologische Beiträge (Würzburg: Echter, 2023), 99–130.

33. Walter D. Mignolo, “El pensamiento decolonial: desprendimiento y apertura. Un manifiesto,” in *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*, ed. Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre, 2007).

meanings are necessary and helpful. After centuries of theology that supported and legitimized colonialism, and in views of a theological coloniality that still contributes to the subordination and exploitation of whole continents, it is of utmost importance to decolonize theology by analyzing its relationships to colonialism and eurocentrism. At the same time, a decolonized theology may be a tool for the faithful who want to contribute to the decolonization of the world. Theology will only be able to do this if it reflects critically about its own coloniality. These are two movements that need to go hand in hand.

As I am doing theology in Europe and from a European point of view, it is necessary for me to reflect on the peculiarities of this task. Decolonizing theology in Europe implies acknowledging ourselves as heirs of the errors of the past. It means also that we need to design strategies to avoid repeating them and, as far as possible, correct them. This will not be possible without an open and fraternal dialogue with the critical theologies of the South, accepting these criticisms and opening up to resistance.

Consequently, doing theology in Europe after the decolonial turn means both unlearning and learning. Unlearning the usual epistemological certainties will reveal itself as a requirement to be able to learn a theology that can contribute to liberation and justice. Gayatri Spivak speaks of the need to “unlearn our privileges as our loss.”³⁴

It is necessary to decolonize theology at all levels. While it is obvious that the disciplines of the history of the church, missiology, the religious studies and other disciplines directly affected by decolonial criticism will have to carefully scrutinize their concepts and approaches in order to adapt them to decolonial criticism, the same applies to biblical sciences, foundational and systematic theology, and other theological disciplines. To achieve epistemic transformation and to rebuild theology in all areas of knowledge as well as from its roots, it is required that theology respects other forms of knowledge and alternative methods which are practiced in postcolonial theologies.

The decolonial turn in theology will need to imply a desire of dialogue. Dialogue, however, is not to be understood simply as a rational discourse on a pre-established topic, but rather as a meeting between bodies who dispose themselves towards the adventure of mutual openness. This adventure will not necessarily be limited to the rational, but can include all kinds of communications and ruptures, from the corporal to the artistic, from the narrative to the ritual, including discussion, resistance and rejection.

34. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 9.

Decolonizing theology must aim at a reconstruction of a more liberating and more equitable theology. It will become, in this process of reconstruction, a theology that is more communal, more interrelated, more animated and dynamic, and even more entertaining. Dialogue, learning by teaching and correcting oneself by learning are attitudes that will make theology more like life, and will help to contribute more effectively to fulfill the theological purpose of putting into practice the good news of the gospel.

CHAPTER 9

UNDOING THEOLOGICAL LIMBOS AND RE-SIGNIFYING GENEALOGIES. THE UNFINISHED PROJECT OF THE *COLONIAL LOCUS THEOLOGICUS*

Montserrat Escribano Cárceles

Being certain about something means forcing yourself not to see all the ambiguities and paradoxes that surround all phenomena, and the only way to do this is to guard your certainty with a weapon. I think that people who are completely sure of their beliefs, their thoughts or how things work are very dangerous [...] Finding a way to condense memory into a physical form is one of the tasks of the study.¹

—William Kentridge

1. Theological distillations of memory

I write these pages from Valencia (*Valentia*), a city founded by Roman military settlers in 138 BCE. Centuries later, it became a small Muslim city (*Balansiya*) during the Almohad Empire until it was conquered by the Christian king of the Crown of Aragon, Jaime I, on September 29, 1238. From then on, the settlers brought the Castilian and Catalan languages, in addition to reinforcing their own religion.² Valencia was home to Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other religious groups, although they did not always coexist peacefully. I begin with this geographical and historical reference, its people and creeds since this city was part of the Crown of Aragon and later, it was ruled by the Habsburg and Borbon dynasties. Each of these historical vicissitudes caused it to have close contacts with two of the scenarios where this reflection moves: the Catholic Church and the overseas colonies. Amid these references and placing myself in this

1. Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, “William Kentridge: ‘Por todo el mundo hay fracturas que provienen del periodo colonial,’” CCCB, Jan 28, 2022. <https://www.cccb.org/es/multimedia/videos/william-kentridge-por-todo-el-mundo-hay-fracturas-que-proviene-del-periodo-colonial/235215>.

2. Josep Torró, “The eastern regions of Al-Andalus before the conquest by Catalonia-Aragon: An overview,” *Catalan Historical Review* 5, no. 11 (2017): 27.

Mediterranean enclave after returning from Manila, Philippines, this research revolves around the relationships between religion, theological ideas, cultural memories, the emergence of (de)colonial rationality and how we currently relate to each of them.

Decolonization as an unfinished project was one of the proposals of INSeCT International Conference. Although, as I shall try to point out in these pages, this vast affirmation cannot be carried out in our theologies without considering the origins and theoretical frameworks that generated the Hispanic Monarchy's colonial thought. This monarchical power developed through an ambitious project of government and from an expansive geographical and cultural perspective, which modified the geographical and cognitive frontiers known up to that time. One of my aims is to show that this colonial rationale—based on advantageous forms of government, legal relations, and trade strategies—was also underpinned by theological and anthropological understandings. Here I will study some of these complex intersections based on the religious imagery that was created on both sides of the *colonial locus* and that served as a bridge. The study of these pieces that, starting in the 15th century, traveled through different worlds today allows us to get closer to their materiality and compositional techniques, but also to their iconology, that is, to the cultural and theological values they contain. Following the round trips of religious imagery leads us to question the location and delimitation of the origins of colonial thought. The interest in adopting this perspective lies in highlighting that geographical spaces determine both their content and, in this case, the theological memories from which the *colonial locus* emerged. Finally, I will try to point out why theology must develop, in the face of colonial oblivion, a theology of the “third day” as a kenotic task capable of reestablishing the duty of memory.

2. A shared technique and a Christ rescued from among the brooms and mops

A few months ago, the head of the *Institut Valencià de Conservació, Restauració i Investigació* (Valencia Institute of Conservation, Restoration and Research IVCR+i), Rosa María Román Garrido, told me about a unique piece that they were working on. It was a lightweight sculpture known as the *Cristo de la Torre*, from Mexico. The piece is a mourning Christ, from the 16th-17th centuries, anonymous and large, 172 cm × 122 cm. However, despite its dimensions, it was a work created and intended not only to be exhibited and venerated, but also to “*procesionar*”; that is, to be displayed on a religious parade and to be shown in religious liturgies

celebrated in public spaces while carried by a celebrant. His sculptors therefore used vegetable techniques and materials such as maize paste, which made them lighter and easier to repair if damaged during transport.

From this geographical location, the technique of “*papelón*” or “*car-tapesa*” was an artistic practice better known. In the city of València it was used in the creation of the religious image that is currently the most venerated for being its patron saint, the “Virgen de los Desamparados.” In this technique, paper is used together with linen rags or cardboard and mixed with natural glues, which becomes a paste that can be modeled and superimposed through different layers. The technique originates in China, Persia, and India, around the year 100 BCE. It arrived in Europe through Venetian merchants and from there it was used in Valencian workshops from the 15th century onwards. This sculptural practice was commonly used first among Valencian artisans, due to the fluid cultural, commercial, and religious exchange that the Crown of Aragon maintained with the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily, as well as some Italian territories. Additionally, paper and textile workshops in cities near Valencia supplied the necessary materials for these productions. “*Papelón*” was widely used in Castile and Andalusia during the 16th century. One of the reasons for its disclosure was that Queen Isabel la Católica began manufacturing ornaments and sculptures for the churches consecrated after the conquest. The reason was the pressure that the Crown had to provide sacred imagery and the liturgical objects necessary for Catholic worship in the new temples erected in Muslim lands. As Román Garrido shows: “In 1500, in Granada, the queen commissioned master Huberto Alemán, the main image maker responsible, to manufacture reproductions of images in series. To do this he worked in molds, a serial production inventoried by himself, a fairly modern concept of production.”³

Light sculpture was present in the peninsula until it fell into disuse in the 19th century, when some clerics of the Catholic Church criticized the use of these materials, considered of lesser nobility, for the production of cult images.⁴ However, in the chronicles written in New Spain territories, there are descriptions from the beginning of the 16th century that this technique was exported to America and that there it was “fused” with traditional pre-Hispanic techniques. According to the IVCR+i, the *Cristo*

3. Rosa María Román Garrido, “Las esculturas ligeras realizadas en papelón, esas grandes desconocidas. Desde el siglo XV en la Corona de Aragón, Valencia, España,” *Mayurqa* 2 (2020): 5, <https://doi.org/10.22307/2386.7124.2020.01.001>.

4. Román Garrido, “Las esculturas ligeras realizadas en papelón, esas grandes desconocidas. Desde el siglo XV en la Corona de Aragón, Valencia, España,” *Mayurqa* 2 (2020): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.22307/2386.7124.2020.01.001>.

de la Torre dates precisely from the time of the viceroyalty of New Spain. The light sculpture technique, both in its paper and maize paste aspects, travelled throughout the known world of the time and, through various forms of hybridization, it was used to express different religious creeds, intentions, and very different languages. In the case of the pre-Hispanic technique, they used the stalk paste, the cob and the maize leaves because it was an abundant resource there. These elements were mixed with other fibers and seeds, giving rise to a paste called *tzoalli*, which served as raw material for the making of idols and gods. The first chronicles about this technique and its materials point to the Valley of Mexico, the area of Michoacán, where the Purépecha or Tarascan populations were responsible for the development of these techniques. Later, according to the chronicles, this method of elaboration also appears among different cultures of Mesoamerica.⁵ In all of them, great sculptural precision was achieved with a singular characteristic, their light weight. The arrival of the missionaries encouraged its inhabitants to continue using these sculptural methods, although adapting them to the new Catholic religion and iconography.

According to the IVCR+I, the *Cristo de la Torre*, may have been made in the workshops of Michoacán or in Mexico. The information that reveals its technique, the materials used, and its age indicate that this piece is a work of great artistic value. However, this Christ was stored and almost forgotten in the back room of the church of Our Lady of Belén in a town near València, Crevillent. Hence it is also commonly known as the *Cristo de Crevillent*. There it remained buried among cleaning supplies, brooms, and mops for many years, after it was donated from a parish in northern Spain until it arrived in this enclave. Now this piece of Mexican light-weight manufacturing has been rescued from oblivion and silence by the IVCR+i team thanks to the interdisciplinary perspective that they are applying to it. On one hand, analysis methods such as Computed Tomography Scans have been used to detail the internal structure, execution technique, and composition materials more precisely. On the other hand, they aim to address new inquiries regarding the techniques employed, the superposition of the layers of colors and varnishes, while at the same time looking for iconographic and iconological meanings that the Christ brings together, as well as the relationship it has with other pieces of light sculpture and similar works of art. This interdisciplinary look at a traveling

5. Valle Blasco Pérez, Enriqueta González-Martínez, and Alejandra Nieto-Villena. "Composición y procedimiento en la elaboración de la escultura ligera de caña de maíz a través de las crónicas novohispanas," *Archivo Publicación del Instituto Universitario de restauración del patrimonio de la UPV* 10 (2015), 153–154.

Christ who harbors within him a condensed memory, despite the fact that he was almost forgotten, serves as a parallel for us to think theologically and hermeneutically guide our own (de)colonial research.

3. The *tornaviaje* as a theological hermeneutical perspective of (de)colonial interpretation

Light cane sculpture gave way to an artistic production to which interest and study have been devoted in recent years. Thanks to this, now in this part of the world we know that the Purépecha or Tarasca population of Michoacán, among others, bequeathed an extraordinary technique that was highly demanded and appreciated by the Spanish and Europeans.⁶ From the early years of the conquest, it was used in the elaboration of religious iconography intended for itinerant evangelization, devotional worship and Catholic liturgies in parishes, monasteries, hospitals, and educational institutions. Likewise, cane imagery was also sent to Spain to record what was being achieved in the new conquered lands. A huge accumulation of artistic objects from New Spain arrived through the transfer of *indianos*; that is, Spanish emigrants who returned to their lands after having amassed a considerable fortune in the New World. As Illona Katzew states: “Such works were held in great esteem, since they not only underlined the bond of these individuals and their families with the land (often over several generations), but also allowed them to prove their power and prestige.”⁷

Many of these sculptures, artistic objects along with spices, plants, silks, and ivories belonged to royal officials, merchants or religious attorneys who brought or sent works and goods with which they wanted to attest to their journey and emotional ties with those lands. This comeback or return to their lands of origin is known as the *tornaviaje*. Here I will adopt these itineraries of origin and return as a perspective that attempts to be an overview of these dynamic and socially constructed border spaces in which the objects, but also the religious and theological ideas, as well as the Catholic missionary enterprises that accompanied them, had a determining weight. To adopt this perspective, we must consider the place and

6. Pablo Francisco Amador Marrero, “The Crucified Christ of Lopud, Croatia. A Unique Early Import of Mexican Polychromed Sculpture Made of Maize Stalks,” *Zeitschrift für Kunsttechnologie und Konservierung* 32, no. 2 (2019): 5–22.

7. Illona Katzew, “Trastoques y elipsis en un retrato de tornaviaje: la ductilidad de los mensajes,” in *Tornaviaje. Tránsito artístico entre los virreinos americanos y la metrópolis*, ed. Fernando Quiles, Pablo F. Amador, and Martha Fernández (Santiago de Compostela: Andavira and Arte, Creación y Patrimonio Iberoamericanos en Redes/Universidad Pablo Olavide, 2020), 14.

orientation from which it is stated. In the case of the *Cristo de Crevillent*, in addition to studying it as an artistic object, it also allows establishing intimate links with the colonial religious, devotional and theological thoughts of that time, and whose memory has not yet been rescued or restored.

I consider it important to keep in mind that, for the Hispanic Monarchy, the perspective of the return journey is oriented towards the new conquered lands. This assumes that the point of departure point was in the East and that from there they looked towards the West; that is, just the opposite perspective to how cultures such as the Portuguese or the Italian thought about their geographical space of interest when, starting in the 15th century, they began their maritime voyages to the African continent.⁸ However, the return journey of the first settlers of the Atlantic territory who departed from Spanish ports—and which from 1571 also included the Philippine Islands and the South Seas—assumed a perspective oriented from the East to the West. This different geographical configuration represented an epistemological expansion that would not only bring new commercial benefits, but an unprecedented anthropological and religious change that reoriented the interests and desires of many people, and forced them to rethink the world in a different way.

The Spanish crown in those years was looking for an alternative trade route to the Portuguese *Carreira da Índia*. This route had managed to connect different seaports in Africa and Asia, and partially stop the advance of the Muslims. The objective was to have greater control over the spice market.⁹ However, the various Spanish voyages to the West found not only a different trade route, but also cultures, worlds, and oceans to explore, as well as a window through which to look into the imposing and almost hermetic Chinese empire of the Ming.¹⁰ As we see, this orientation opened expansionist perspectives and territorial conquest that became political forms on a global scale for the first time.¹¹ Therefore, the *tornaviaje* included the return from the islands of the Pacific Ocean, passing through the American continent until reaching the coasts of Cádiz and the port of the city of Seville, to finally reach their peninsular destinations. From this perspective of “journey and return journey” a

8. Ricardo Padrón, *The Indies of the setting Sun. How Early Modern Spain Mapped the Far East as the Transpacific West* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2020).

9. Isabel Soler, *Magallanes & CO* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2022).

10. Manel Ollé, *Islas de plata, imperios de seda. Juncos y galeones en los Mares del Sur* (Acantilado: Barcelona, 2022), 37–41.

11. Peter Gordon and Juan José Morales, *La plata y el pacífico. China, Hispanoamérica y el nacimiento de la globalización, 1565-1815* (Vilaur: Girona: Siruela, 2022).

complex network of economic, social and religious relations unfolded and extended itself between the Hispanic peninsula and the new continent. These colonial relationships of dependency, confrontation and deep disagreement took place in the South Seas, with the Philippine Islands as a central enclave.

Adopting this perspective of return travel serves decolonial theology as a hermeneutic tool to situate and interpret the diverse worlds that came into contact during the so-called period of the Hispanic Monarchy. Sculptural techniques, decorative arts, images of piety, spices, cotton, tobacco, sugar and, above all, precious materials, such as gold and silver, were the great assets of these movements, as were the protagonists of the religious and theological ideas that founded colonial rationality. This rationality was the framework of thought from which the conquest and colonization were carried out after the discovery of the new territories and which was also present in the Catholic Church of the peninsula. Therefore, I will try to relate, although in a humble way, this enormous geographical and temporal location of exchanges and hybridizations that gave rise to the largest empire so far known in terms of territory and wealth. In this colonial rationality of return travel, the visual construction of the theological fact had a very important weight. That is, the production, reproduction and hybridization of images, sacred spaces, devotions, and religious liturgies that gave way to a “vernacular visuality.”¹² This visuality was shaped through crucifixes, such as the *Cristo de Crevillent*, virgins, religious imagery, liturgical elements and, also shaped thanks to the literary and musical compositions that accompanied religious celebrations. The presence of all these elements, although transformed over time, permeated almost all the spaces of the Spanish Monarchy,¹³ and considering them allows us to go beyond the materiality of the elements themselves and question from what theological perspectives they were elaborated.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that the establishment of this first transoceanic line, from the Philippines to Spain, considered as the first commercial globalization, had an enormous cost of lives, involved the extraction of materials and plants, as well as the elimination of Indigenous cultures and their spiritualities. These religious practices were delegitimized from a colonial reason supported by European theological, religious ideas, evangelizing and missionary methods which served as epistemic scaffolding for new imposed cultural forms.

12. W.J.T. Mitchell, “Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 178–179.

13. Catherine Infante, *The Arts of Encounter: Christians, Muslims, and the Power of Images in Early Modern Spain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

On March 30, 2023, the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development together with the Dicastery for Culture and Education issued a joint document in which they repudiated the so-called “Doctrine of Discovery” declaring that:

It is in this context of listening to indigenous peoples that the Church has heard the importance of addressing the concept referred to as the “doctrine of discovery.” The legal concept of “discovery” was debated by colonial powers from the sixteenth century onward and found particular expression in the nineteenth century jurisprudence of courts in several countries, according to which the discovery of lands by settlers granted an exclusive right to extinguish, either by purchase or conquest, the title to or possession of those lands by indigenous peoples. Certain scholars have argued that the basis of the aforementioned “doctrine” is to be found in several papal documents, such as the Bulls *Dum Diversas* (1452), *Romanus Pontifex* (1455) and *Inter Caetera* (1493).¹⁴

Where the document says “in this context of listening to indigenous peoples” refers to the penitential pilgrimage that Pope Francis made to visit these communities in Canada from July 24 to 30, 2022. Upon his return he maintained that what had happened there was a genocide due, in large part, to the colonialist attitude maintained by the church towards the Indigenous peoples. One of the greatest effects of this pilgrimage trip has been the formal condemnation of the doctrine of discovery, which is a decisive step for ecclesial decolonization. Furthermore, during this pilgrimage the Pope highlighted two important theological aspects, one of them was that “we are children of a history that must be guarded” and another one that “we are artisans of a history that must be built.” These two actions “guarding” and “building” place us before a nuclear ethical and theological dilemma about how we should elaborate the memory of our ecclesial colonial past and how to understand it theologically if we want it to enlighten our future believers.

What happened in Canada is unfortunately only a small part of the great *colonial locus* that we must consider. Brutality, civility, and religious ideas are not exclusive phenomena and, as the civilizing and bureaucratic models of colonial governments spread, so did the organizational and ideological capacity of violence.¹⁵ It is true that encompassing the *colonial locus* is impossible here, but what we can do is to remember our theological elaborations that: a) injustices are not merely episodic or geographical,

14. Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, “Joint Statement on the ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’” March 30, 2023, <https://www.humandevlopment.va/en/news/2023/nota-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-scoperta.html>.

15. Siniša Malešević, *The Rise of Organised Brutality: A Historical Sociology of Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316155332>.

but have a global and transhistorical scope; b) they always generate social, political, theological and religious effects that, as ancestral extensions, continue to be present in migratory movements and population expulsions,¹⁶ and c) many of these effects continue to be silenced and forgotten. Hence, both fundamental theology and political philosophy, disciplines in which I am situated, are appropriate academic fields to critically investigate what the “custody” of that *colonial locus* should be like and how we should elaborate the “construction” of the theological decolonial memoirs. As a methodological guideline, I will follow these recurring verbs that appear in the gospels and that indicate how Jesus of Nazareth approached his own reality: stop, pay attention, listen, and dialogue.

4. Stop ourselves. The *limbo* state of theology in the Spanish State

Since its return to Mexico, the *Cristo de Crevillent* was left in a kind of *limbo*; that is, it was here for years, but it had no possibility of being able to express anything about its own origin and journey. We can say that its presence, being removed from the *Cristo de Crevillent*, was stopped in time. This silent mode hid the stories that forged it, the festivals, processions, and liturgies in which it participated and that made the *Cristo de Crevillent* a present and active element of the spiritual heritage in each of the various places of which it was a part. Theologically it was a sculpture created to “incarnate” and be part of the spirituality of the people who contemplated it. However, its silencing led it to an almost inert and battered state. Therefore, this light sculpture created to be displayed, “processioned”, and venerated could barely contribute anything to our current faith.

The Christ serves as a metaphor for the current state of theology in Spain with respect to colonial history and what I call a “theology of limbo.” That was one of the first questions that the organizers of the INSeCT Congress asked me when they proposed me to do this reflection. Their interest was to know from what perspectives, orientations and epistemologies coloniality and postcolonial theologies were being thought about within Spanish theology. Elaborating on a possible answer always requires first stopping and reflecting. Hence, I choose the term *limbo* to name it.¹⁷ Colloquially, Spanish speakers say that those who live in *limbo*:

16. Saskia Sassen, *Expulsiones. Brutalidad y complejidad en la economía global* (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2015).

17. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* includes in its numbers 633 and 635 several allusions to this intermediate state in which unbaptized boys and girls remained, due to original sin, after their death.

“are children who neither feel nor suffer.” *Limbo*, although it is no longer a recurring concept in current theology, allows us to make an initial diagnosis. To affirm that current Spanish theology suffers from a state of *limbo* with respect to colonial history, the geographies where they took place and its relationship with the time of the Empire, is to certify a state of academic omission, also shared with many other disciplines.

Above, I have mentioned that I situate myself within fundamental theology and that leads me to trace the causes and reasons on which this complex situation is based. The border character of critical fundamental theology allows us to search for and question the possible causes that sustained and encouraged the elision of certain memories over others in the *colonial locus*. Hence, guarding memory here is critically understanding how some stories, events, objects, intangible goods and even some spiritual experiences were chosen and summarized instead of others. What remains walks alongside what one tries to forget, pretend, or is ignored and, as Londa Schiebinger states:

Ignorance is often not merely the absence of knowledge but an outcome of cultural and political struggle. [...] What we know or do not know at any one time or place is shaped by particular histories, local and global priorities, funding patterns, institutional and disciplinary hierarchies, personal and professional myopia, and much else as well.¹⁸

Memory has a historical and political dimension, which is why we must take into account, as a methodological tool, “agnotology,”¹⁹ since it is a discipline which studies culturally induced ignorance, allowing us to reorient theological questions about what we know, but also about what we have made invisible or silenced. In the case of theology, the state of *limbo* supposes a certain “epistemic comfort,” since we have decided that this past has little or nothing to tell us and we have chosen to ignore it. However, the colonial past was often constructed from an ideology of extraction, violence, and legalized slavery, and the fractures and wounds of this past continue to have a strong presence today. As the South African artist William Kentridge states, all over the world there are fractures that come from the colonial period, they continue to have a strong echo and we can no longer pretend in their face that we can ignore them.²⁰

18. Londa Schiebinger, “Introduction,” in *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press EBooks, 2007), 3, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674043275-002>.

19. Londa Schiebinger and Robert N. Proctor, *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

20. Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, “William Kentridge.”

5. Pay attention to the geography and temporality of the *colonial locus*

Fundamental theology must stop and pay attention to the theological rationalities that supported colonial thought, to what the different modes of evangelization were like, to the visual and material methodologies that were followed for the implementation of devotional and liturgical practices in places as disparate as Mexico, Peru, Guinea, or the Philippines. It is therefore about critically establishing what the geographical spaces are and reviewing the genealogies, also the theological ones, that we have managed so far. From the perspective of the return voyage that I pursue, we must consider that it must include the Philippine Islands and the transoceanic networks that were drawn from there. This geographical border enclave has not occupied great interest within postcolonial studies, compared to studies dedicated to coloniality in America, although it is especially significant for the way in which the Spanish Empire was there. In the Philippine Islands, a religious ideal was pursued for more than three hundred years and shared with the rest of the transoceanic colonial territories, which had the purpose of converting the “infidels” into “faithful subjects” of Catholic Spain for their safety and salvation. However, the presence of religious orders, commercial exchange and modes of government caused colonial singularities that did not occur in other territories. Missionary history is extensive and well documented. Much of our theology has been developed with this history treasured in the archives of religious orders such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians or Jesuits as a reference. However, fundamental decolonial theology must also be put into dialogue with the rest of the fields of historical research, particularly, among others, that which studies the collaboration between the political-administrative government and the ecclesiastical government since both became an inseparable whole, at least in the case of the Philippines.²¹ At the same time, if we want to have a temporal arc more adjusted to the *colonial locus*, we cannot ignore the last colonies that the Spanish State maintained during the Franco regime in Equatorial Guinea.²² Therefore, a crucial task of critical fundamental theology is to acknowledge all the colonial memories that have been overlooked in order to create a liberating decolonial theology for the present.

Pausing before the geographical, historical and religious complexity, and paying attention to the relationships that were established between

21. Xavier Huetz de Lempis, Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida, and María-Dolores Elizalde, *Gobernar colonias, administrar almas. Poder colonial y órdenes religiosas en los imperios ibéricos (1808-1930)* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2018), 12–16.

22. Iñaki Tofiño, *Guinea. El delirio colonial de España* (Manresa: Bellaterra, 2022).

the different groups—missionaries, Native clergy and employees of the colonial administrations—in these temporally and theologically distant places allows us to go beyond a biased vision that considers the colonial clergy as a mere instrument or collaborator of power and the colonized people as subjects without agency.²³

6. Listen to avoid the temptation to “be tempted to turn the page”

The state of *limbo* of current Spanish theology responds to a way of forgetting and throwing away a past that does not want to be addressed. This diagnosis, which may seem somewhat harsh, means, on the one hand, that we have deliberately neglected a good part of our believing memory and that we have tried to repudiate our colonial origins as the Spanish Empire. On the other hand, it also means that we have chosen some memories over others in an attempt to move forward in search of a seemingly more promising future that does not compromise our present too much. As a society we have repetitively developed different stories that have explained and justified almost the whole of a past that was not always honorable. The permanence in this kind of cognitive *limbo* responds to a deliberate epistemic elaboration that pursues the absence “of pathos,” that is, apathy. In other words, what we now perceive of that distant reality is the result of a historical selection woven with certain details and scraps of all the information available. Theology has also made an effort to reconstruct this past in order to make it seem distant, stable and, above all, typical of another time and mindset. In this way, the colonial past has become, theologically and culturally, an innocuous time that does not sting the present, that is, it does not make us suffer. However, Pope Francis in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* warns that:

Nowadays, it is easy to be tempted to turn the page, to say that all these things happened long ago, and we should look to the future. For God’s sake, no! We can never move forward without remembering the past; we do not progress without an honest and unclouded memory. We need to “keep alive the flame of collective conscience, bearing witness to succeeding generations to the horror of what happened”, because that witness “awakens and preserves the memory of the victims, so that the conscience of humanity may rise up in the face of every desire for dominance and destruction.”²⁴

23. Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

24. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Vatican, October 3, 2020, no. 249, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

The apathetic distancing from theology silences the pain and allows us to forget our moral responsibility that has been frequently silenced by common statements such as, “we did the best that could be done,” or “we cannot judge what happened there with the current keys.” This attempt to “turn the page” is completely insufficient to respond to the history that, sooner or later, always continues to show its unresolved intergenerational effects. For this reason, the colonial time in the Philippines, in Latin America and, starting in the 19th century, in Africa cannot be a history reduced to a static, distant and stable time since it was highly variable, unstable, and sometimes unpredictable.

7. To establish a dialogue with colonial identities and restoring genealogies

Approaching history to guard it means establishing a dialogue with it depending basically, on the epistemic approach we resort to. Hence, choosing some methods of analysis, some research practices and some perspectives of approach over others are epistemic-political decisions that are not alien to history or their contexts. Above we referred to the importance for the theological task of establishing the temporality of the *colonial locus*, its historicity and the geographical space it encompasses. At the same time, it is also necessary to critically dialogue with colonial genealogies that consist of pointing out their colonial origins and the frameworks of intelligibility from which the colonial mentality emerged. One of the first questions is: How did the colonial rationality start? This question is crucial because rationality is not born, but rather becomes colonial.

The answers must take into account that the colonial origin was carved both on this side of the world and from its eastern geographies. Furthermore, questioning the genealogies of coloniality takes us to the terrain of identities and their intimate relationship with the history of ideas. So, we must consider that the colonial beginnings were forged from certain values, symbolic practices, expectations, beliefs and customs that outlined their frameworks of intelligibility. I will first point out three of the axes that influenced religious and cultural ideas and that carved theological rationality and its colonial identity over time. Next, I will describe some characteristics of how the genealogies from the *Western Islands* were established.

7.1 *Fixing genealogies on this side of the world*

One of the main axis of this colonial framework is that from their beginnings the Catholic Monarchy, was sustained thanks to the religious belief of blood purity. The “Catholic” managed to forge a dominant identity

marked by differences in the face of “the other” religions that were inferior and undesirable.²⁵ This idea of a non-Catholic “other” who could be expelled or eliminated was present at the Crown of Aragon, and during the beginning of the conquest. Also, we found veins of thought that made these conceptions vary and that are interesting in order to elaborate a decolonial fundamental theology.²⁶ The antecedents of this colonial rationality must be established in the birth of the Catholic Crown in 1492. In 1502/1526, thousands of Jews and Muslims had already been expelled, but until 1614 these expulsion practices were continued in cities such as València, and even in cities with many converts (250,000 Moriscos were expelled; 4% of the Spanish population). It was thought that these movements would solve the problem between “heretics” and “converts.” However, the situation worsened and spread in the Spanish imagination over time. The discrimination against and hatred for the “converts” or “*Marranos*” by the “Old Christians,” which lasted in some areas until the 19th century.²⁷

These serious events forged a notion of social, cultural, and religious identity whose imaginary was marked, from its beginnings, by codes of purity and impurity; and of honor and cleanliness.²⁸ On the one hand, society sought at all costs to prove its lineage and its belonging to the only faith allowed against the minorities formed by Moorish, the Semitic lineages and the low-born. And although there was a certain permeability and fluidity between these identities, an anxiety and a constant desire to show the purity of the blood or the veracity of the conversion was perceived in society until, at least, the 19th century.²⁹ Religious intolerance was growing, and the Spanish identity was rooted in Catholicism and Spanish meant Christian, or more precisely Old Christian, as opposed to the “New Christian” converts from Islam or Judaism. On the other hand, the Catholic kingdom expanded, giving way to new forms of government and administration in each of the territories annexed to the crown. First, different cultures came together such as Italy, Flanders, Castile, Aragon, then America; and parts of the Atlantic coast, and finally the Philippine islands.

25. David Nirenberg, *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 117.

26. Alfons Aragoneses, “Uses of Convivencia and Filosefardismo in Spanish Legal Discourses,” *Rechtsgeschichte – Legal History* 26 (2018): 203. <https://doi.org/10.12946/rg26/200-219>.

27. Aragoneses, “Uses of Convivencia and Filosefardismo in Spanish Legal Discourses,” 204.

28. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York et al.: Routledge, 2002), 5.

29. Christina H. Lee, *The Anxiety of Sameness in Early Modern Spain*, Studies in Early Modern European History (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 14–15.

The result was that the Spanish Crown expanded culturally, territorially and organizationally, becoming an Empire. This meant that the old geographical limits of the *Finis terrae* were surpassed by the new horizon of *Non plus ultra*, adopted by the Spanish Crown. This expansive desire (territorial, cultural, and religious) led the Crown to even dream of a possible territorial conquest of China.

A third decisive element in determining the hinges around which the genealogy of this colonial rationality moves is the particular relationship that the Spanish Monarchy maintained with the Papacy. The Habsburg dynasty, to reinforce its sovereignty and keep the different European and overseas territories cohesive, resorted to a new political theology, which presented itself to the world as the great champion of Catholicism.³⁰ In this way, the administrative territorial articulation was assembled through the unity that granted the only possible faith. The Catholic Church was thus the guarantor of the unique truth and, especially after the Council of Trent (1545–1563) it set out to fight against all “heresy.” The Spanish Habsburgs combined both systems and imagined a community of subjects in which a single king ruled over millions of people on every continent, all united by the pope’s Rome faith in a new *Orbis Catholicus*.³¹

7.2 *Fixing genealogies on the other side of the world: Philippine colonial history (1565–1598)*

The historical beginnings of the incorporation of these territories into the Spanish Crown are well known. After the first expedition of Magellan,³² King Philip II [still a Prince of Asturias,] commissioned a new expedition to Adelantado Miguel López de Legazpi and fray Andrés de Urdaneta for a peaceful entry in the Islas del West. However, the presence of the Spanish, for many reasons, will have its own and differentiated accents that, for its political-religious relevance, cannot be forgotten. I highlight here only some characteristics that this colonial enclave offers and that can help us understand the theological genealogies and some of the “effects” it had on colonial rationality. One of them is its geography and, therefore, its proximity to China, Japan, and the rest of the Asian islands. Another is the economy thanks to the discovery in 1565 of the so-called

30. Pablo González Tornel, “Forging an Image for the Spanish Monarchy in Seventeenth-Century Rome. Habsburg Religiosity and Visual Propaganda,” *Hispanic Research Journal* 19, no. 5 (2018): 481–499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682737.2018.1511282>.

31. González Tornel, “Forging an Image for the Spanish Monarchy in Seventeenth-Century Rome.”

32. Soler, *Magallanes & CO*.

tornaviaje route, of the Manila Galleon piloted by Juan de Salcedo and fray Andrés de Urdaneta. This route, drawn from Manila to Acapulco, opened new transpacific connections and marked the beginning of an authentic global route of material, cultural, and religious exchange. Furthermore, anthropologically in the Western Islands there will be an interesting mix of peoples, identities, languages, and customs. Therefore, the Catholics who are a minority are going to have to find ways of coexisting with the inhabitants who are Muslim, Sangley, and Japanese, which means that they profess the religion against which the Crown, Islam and other Asian creeds are opposed. To begin this evangelizing and catechetical task they will use the incipient theological modes, typical of the Hispanic religious identity, but also those that emerged, first from the New Spanish world of America and, later, from the new echoes of counter-reformation Europe that arrived from the 17th century, creating new religious, visual, and aesthetic languages in the Philippine Islands.

In this breeding ground the missionaries, mostly men, but also women, launched ways of evangelization that were closely linked to the material, spiritual, and human resources present in this extensive geographic enclave. These missionary methods were developed keeping in mind the privileges and honors of the incipient Spanish-Filipino elite, and whose objective was threefold: evangelize, civilize and Hispanize. The administration from its beginnings fell to the religious orders; and even their capacity to exercise power as well as the administration of the laws increased from the 19th century onwards. Hence, religion and moral issues, as I have mentioned, were always the spearhead of territorial occupations and the justification for the exercise of control over the population. The result is that a *frailocracia* was created that was the essential support for governability,³³ one that followed a Catholic identity politics that was not always fair.

This colonial history was not free of tensions, contradictions, and violence throughout its three hundred years of occupation. Returning to it, therefore, forces us to leave the theological state of *limbo* in which we find ourselves. Hence, to (de)colonial theology from this perspective of return travel something similar to the *Cristo de Crevillent* happens; that is, it is necessary to apply “interdisciplinary restoration” work to remove layers of dirt, repair spaces damaged and see what new meanings it reveals.

33. María Dolores Elizande, “Gobierno colonial y órdenes religiosas en Filipinas en las últimas décadas del siglo XIX. Cuando la religión se convierte en instrumento político,” in *Gobernar Colonias, Administrar Almas*, ed. Xavier Huetz de Lempis, Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida, and María-Dolores Elizalde (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2018).

8. Compassionate and liberating theological rationalities

The epistemological beginnings of Philippine colonial history can be found in the *Escuela de Salamanca* (1556). An interdisciplinary study center that included, among many others, Dominican Friars, such as Matías de Paz, Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo Soto, Bartolomé de las Casas and later, Melchor Cano, to name just a few. As we know, their pedagogies and theological methods entailed changes that revolutionized theological, legal, economic, or philosophical thinking, which also influenced disciplines such as botany or cosmology. I will briefly stop at one of the greatest thinkers of this school, Francisco de Vitoria. His thought introduced in Spain and, therefore, later in America, the reading and interpretation of Thomas of Aquinas. This theological change allowed the legal and moral problems denounced from the territories of New Spain to be debated in Spanish classrooms. New epistemic frameworks thus emerged that made it possible to establish, although incipiently, equality, freedom, and dignity of human beings.

The new theological rationality that emerged from the *Escuela de Salamanca* set its central axis on the defense of the Indians of America and on the non-legitimate activities of the *conquistadores* and *encomenderos*. The epistemic turn was located from its beginnings in the refutation that the “Indians” should be considered as human beings, since they were endowed with rational and social capacity (*zoon politikon*). Antonio de Montesinos had already denounced the cruelties of the war and the slave-like and inhumane treatment that the Spanish were inflicting on the Indians in the *encomiendas*, but the theological thought of the *Escuela de Salamanca* also introduced a decisive criticism against the legitimization of the conquest. Its objective was to highlight the unfair effects of violence applied to people, cultures, material goods and natural resources. This epistemic turn represented a new and compassionate theological perspective that showed that the “conquest” could not be interpreted only from a legal perspective, but rather had to be posed, first of all, as a moral and philosophical challenge. The conquest, the management of its taxation and the government of these territories came to be understood as a problem of individual conscience for which neither the Crown of Spain nor the Pope could be ultimately responsible.

9. Decolonizing as an unfinished project

The theological turn of the *Escuela de Salamanca* occurs thanks to the interpretation of the thought of Thomas of Aquinas but, above all, to

attentive listening to the injustice practiced by those who preceded us. The experience of suffering, even if it is from the distant past, is an effort to keep alive the historical responsibility that we still have. The reason for this responsibility is, as the South African painter William Kentridge states, that: “We are surrounded by fractures that come from the colonial period.” History and suffering refer to these “fractures” that continue to appear over time. Thus, the decolonial task is a continued and unfinished project that seeks to rescue and organize memories, as well as the fractures that it currently shows. Montesinos’ famous question “Are these not also men?” became a cry that continues to resonate today. For this reason, I consider that the (de)colonial theological task must be an attempt to understand why things could not be otherwise.

As we know, the *Escuela de Salamanca* and its compassionate proposal was not the theological paradigm that managed to impose itself in the *colonial locus*. However, in the Philippines there were attempts to do things differently. We find an example at the beginning of the occupation and, as John Phelan states, it was “essentially a missionary enterprise.”³⁴ Despite this, we find some striking and perhaps little-remembered facts in its origins that suggest that there were also attempts to exercise a more just and compassionate presence. One of these incipient events was the appointment as bishop of Manila, by King Philip II, of Fray Domingo de Salazar, trained in the law and theology that emanated from the *Escuela de Salamanca*. This Dominican friar had repeatedly denounced, during his stay in Mexico, the illegitimacy of the conquest. Salazar was a disciple of Bartolomé de las Casas and both defended that:

- A) The presence of the Spanish could only be justified for reasons of evangelization and only as long as it respected the freedom of the Indigenous people.
- B) The military conquest was illegitimate because all peoples have rights over their lands. So, to justify the presence of the Spanish they had to have the agreement of the local towns.
- C) The taxes collected were unfair because no one had asked them to be present in those lands.

The bishop of Manila encountered much resistance, and his successor, Miguel de Benavides, also continued in this defensive effort. He obtained a *Cédula Real* on 8 February 1597, which ordered the governor to organize a referendum among the natives. With this, Philip II intended to know whether or not they accepted the presence of the Spanish and thus avoid

34. Christina H. Lee, *Saints of Resistance. Devotions in the Philippines under early Spanish Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

the violent confrontations that had occurred in the New Spain territories. The result of the plebiscite held on 21 March 1599 was in favor of the Crown. The participants agreed to pay some taxes, but not those that had been abused by merchants and *encomenderos*. These, in turn, had to return the money and it was allocated to pious works for the neediest. The first plebiscite's celebration is a little-known political and theological fact that can be connected to the end of the colonial period. The Philippines freed itself from Spanish colonial rule thanks to its population establishing a republic for the first time in history.

The *Cristo de Crevillent* and the words of Pope Francis remind us that through its materials and accumulated layers, historical responsibility must be attended to and guarded. On the one hand, we cannot bury the colonial practices of theft, extraction, and violence. They were unjust. However, it is important to note that this is a spiritual grievance that requires theological and ecclesiastical rescue.

10. Towards a “third day theology”

Theology now has the opportunity to “denaturalize” its origins and move away from the state of *limbo* in which it has settled. This naturalization has neutralized the possibility of knowing colonial history in more detail and has distanced us from responsibility for the effects caused over time by the theology of conquest. The rescued and restored presence of *Cristo de la Torre* by Rosa María Román Garrido reminds us that colonial history and the theology of conquest, from Manila to Malabo, was accompanied by a visuality generated through images, religious liturgies, catechetical processes, and spaces of worship that, although very different and distant in time, saturated colonial evangelization and their own believing history. There are many questions that still remain to be stated and answered when we think about the *colonial locus*. In the case of the Philippine Islands, some of the main questions revolve around the role played by religious orders and the Jesuits during their three centuries of occupation; to the control modes developed through administrative tasks; and to missionary methods that were often hybridized with the previous religious beliefs of the inhabitants of the Manila sultanate. This web of imperial and missionary networks, dependent on trade with China and which converged in the city of Manila, extended the project of domination of the Hispanic Monarchy from the Pacific to Spanish territory. The idea of an *Orbis Catholicus* was forged theologically from an ethnographic and anthropological project developed, often, in opposition to “the other” who was considered alien, different, lesser, or even lacking dignity and

that should be deracinated in order to assimilate the new Christian doctrine that was imposed on them.³⁵ Although empires perished from the 19th century onwards, colonial theological ideas remained, as did some of their forms of government and commerce. The consequences of this colonizing process can still be seen through the marked inequalities between countries, the hegemonic discourses of race,³⁶ migratory networks or the human trafficking that feeds the gears of our economic systems today. The current state of Spanish theology remains in *limbo*, producing theological thought as if the colonial era never existed or was a closed and alien part of history. Therefore, the current theological task persists in its agnotological effort;³⁷ that is, in producing and maintaining us in a naive theology that prefers not to know in order to maintain a painless and apathetic cognitive distance.

In contrast, as Pope Francis points out, we now have the opportunity and the urgency to be “custodians” of History. This opportunity will be possible if we leave this *limbo* and run the risk of developing a “third day theology.” If *limbo* was a metaphor for a situation in which responsibilities are neither assumed nor suffered, the theology of the third day that I propose is a proposal and a call to redeem religious history and exercise theological responsibility. The critical perspective of this type of theology is not from the spiritual conquest, which aims to convert, and which requires, prior social uprooting, to establish a new doctrine in the midst of a social group. This theology of the third day assumes a kenotic perspective, that is, of abasement since, like Jesus of Nazareth, it runs through life given up to death and, from its expiration, it heads towards the resurrection. As we know, the “third day” is the theological resource used by both some passages in the Jewish Testament and the Christian Testament to refer to the time that passes from death until we are fully “incorporated” into God. Taking the “third day” as a theological reference means assuming semantic terms that are close, such as: redemption, recapitulation or incorporation in Christ. Furthermore, theologically it assumes that death does not close the history of salvation and that Jesus himself, before experiencing the resurrection, rescues humanity from death and oblivion. The terms “death” and “oblivion,” as the Semitic world shows us, walk closely together. In the same way, death can imply a moral forgetfulness,

35. John D. Blanco, *Counter-Hispanization in the Colonial Philippines. Literature, Law, Religion, and Native Custom* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 107–109.

36. Judith Gruber, “White Innocence / White Supremacy,” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 7, no. 2 (2021): 515–38, <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-bja10022>.

37. Schiebinger and Proctor, *Agnotology*.

since according to the philosopher Reyes Mate, death can eliminate the recognition of injustice and, therefore, the duty of justice. Hence, he states that:

Death is not a “factum” that closes the chapter of justice because if it were so, we would be facing an expression of nihilism. To see death as a demand for justice, it would have to be judged from the point of view of redemption. Redemption is what allows us to see death not as a “factum”, but as a deprivation, an injustice. That excess of meaning for the present that the anticipation of redemption entails is capital for the living. In order for these to be recognized as subjects of justice (being “end” in Kantian terms) and not mere “means”, injustice to the dead must be kept alive, their deaths must be seen as deprivation of what is owed to them, an injustice.³⁸

A theology of the third day, oriented from the salvific idea of redemption, can help us remember that denying history, not establishing its genealogies or geographies well, means exercising a historical grievance against the victims, which means perpetuating injustice. The theology of the third day wants, therefore, to trace the genesis of colonial rationality to discover what were its matrices of thought and how the theologies of conquest were developed which, through religious forms, gave way, from a Catholic identity, to abuse, violence, forced assimilation or spiritual epistemicide of many peoples. In the same way, it shows that we lack a theological historiography of colonization that goes beyond the history of missiology. This would mean paying attention to the relationships that the clergy and religious orders established with the different groups that lived in the Philippines—such as the *Sangleyes*, the natives, the Muslims or the Japanese—and with their religious or spiritual traditions. Not taking charge of history and its colonial religious content theologically limits our understanding of the incarnation and salvation. As Kathryn Gim Lum states: “We hope that gaining a deeper understanding of the complex roles of religion will enhance our commitments to reparative action and racial justice and healing in our own time and in our context.”³⁹

For all this, guarding the history of the colonial period is recognizing that salvation does not occur without the history of theological ideas being rescued. Getting out of the epistemic *limbos*, as we have tried to show, is to recognize what has been long ignored and unavailable to our current theological knowledge. Third day theology reminds us that salvation and the duty of memory do not always happen only in an attempt to move forward but must critically keep in mind its colonial origins.

38. Reyes Mate, *La herencia del olvido* (Errata Naturae, 2008), 223.

39. Kathryn Gim Lum, “Religion, Race, and the Double Helix of White Supremacy,” *Harvard University News*, March 6, 2021, <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2023/2/14/video-religion-race-and-double-helix-white-supremacy>.

UNLEARNING OUR PRIVILEGES
(AS *WHITE* THEOLOGIANS) AS OUR LOSS?
DECOLONIAL CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF
CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS

Edith Wittenbrink

Introduction

If we take seriously the claim that “colonial structures continue to persist globally in economic systems, in social discourses and political relations, and in the epistemic practices through which we make sense of the world”¹ and that Christianity used to and continues to be deeply entangled with such structures, as well as with struggles against them, then it becomes obvious that theologies and theologians have to allow themselves to be questioned concerning their—our—own role in this context. This should be valid especially, though not only, for theologians who are rooted in the former colonizing parts of the world. In German-speaking theology the confrontation with decolonial and postcolonial approaches² has increased significantly in recent years, at least according to research topics and publications.³ Yet, the degree of engagement with these questions varies according to the denomination and to the theological discipline. Moreover, tackling them as scholarly challenges does not necessarily imply letting them question our own self-understandings.

In Christian Social Ethics, my area of investigation, there are incipient debates around possible applications of such approaches in this specific

1. INSeCT, “Decolonizing Theologies: Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges: Conference Booklet,” 1, accessed October 28, 2023, https://www.insecttheology.net/_files/ugd/fc2bdb_ab587131d600432899b03c9ad9ca1c2b.pdf.

2. For a possible differentiation between the terms “decolonial” and “postcolonial” see, for example, Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie: Eine kritische Einführung*, UTB, 3rd edition (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), 331–34.

3. For an overview, see Michael Nausner, “Zur Rezeption Postkolonialer Theorie in der deutschsprachigen Theologie: Ein Literaturüberblick,” *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 61 (2020): 183–209.

field.⁴ However, considering that social ethical questions are implicitly present in many of the publications on post- and decolonial theology, it is noticeable that larger studies are still missing.⁵ Here I aim to give an overview of some of the central challenges that theological ethics face in this context by using as a starting point the concept of *White*⁶ privilege, but presenting rather initial lines of thought and questions than conclusive answers.

I will first briefly sketch the panorama of decolonial challenges today in Germany,⁷ then (2) define the central concepts that I am working with, before (3) I outline specific risks for social ethical thinking from a decolonial viewpoint. (4) I then suggest some approaches for reducing them at least; and (5) finish with questions that will (or have to) remain open.

1. Decolonial challenges in Germany today

It is not rare for the reference to decolonial approaches in Germany to evoke a certain lack of understanding, since the necessity of these is considered to be directly related to colonial rule—and thus seemingly far away from Germany today. Without going into detail, I will therefore briefly outline a few of the issues that justify such analytical perspectives as relevant to Germany.

First of all, today's Germany does belong to the circle of former colonial powers, even if German colonial history is often relativized because of the comparatively late start (1884) and early end (1919) of the formal possession of colonies by the German Empire.⁸ However, atrocities such as the 1904–1908 genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama and the 1905–1907 Maji-Maji War make it clear that the German colonial regime in Africa was among the cruelest. Furthermore, a “colonial ideology,” which assumes clear superiority over non-European cultures and populations, was also present and influential before 1884 and after 1919. I just recall on the one

4. Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Claudius Bachmann, and Josef Becker, “Vorwort: Postkoloniale Theorien und Sozialethik,” *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 61 (2020): 9–17.

5. Nausner, “Zur Rezeption Postkolonialer Theorie in der deutschsprachigen Theologie,” 204.

6. In Whiteness Studies it is common to italicize the term in order to mark its constructural character and to distinguish it from Blackness as a self-designation with the associated potential for Black resistance; Maureen Maisha Eggers, ed., *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Münster: Unrast-Verlag, 2005), 14.

7. I am referring to German-speaking social ethics, but for space reasons I will focus only on Germany in this chapter, as Austria and Switzerland have their specific historical backgrounds. Still, the social and discursive situations are not completely different.

8. Michael Nausner, “Ambivalenzen der Partizipation: Theologische Reflexionen zur Teilhabe unter postkolonialen Bedingungen,” in *Postkoloniale Theologien II*, ed. Andreas Nehring and Simone Wiesgickl (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 40.

hand the contributions of German philosophy to stabilize a Eurocentric worldview,⁹ and on the other hand certain continuities between colonial and Nazi ideology and practice—for example, the “scientific doctrine of race” and the implementation of concentration camps. An adequate awareness of Germany’s own colonial past and its implications has not yet been established, and in general a critical analysis of the function of national memory culture is needed.¹⁰ In recent years, initiatives in this direction have been increasing, but the challenge remains.¹¹

The continuing consequences of the colonial era include massively exploitative structures in a globalized world, which lead to lasting inequality in a wide range of areas. This is particularly evident in financial and economic terms, but also in many other areas of life—not least in the university context.¹² The infrastructure and systems established in colonial times continue to shape relations between former colonies and former colonial powers on many levels. Questions of international relations and economic dependencies, which will not be elaborated further here, are also highly relevant fields for Christian social ethics.

Finally, we can witness the impact of colonial continuities within society in Germany itself. The presence in Germany of citizens and migrants with roots in the colonies since the 20th century seems at first glance to have little to do with colonial history. However, the discrimination against racialized people is rooted in colonial ideologies and thus shapes coexistence in Germany.¹³ Currently 24% of the population in Germany has a history of immigration (they or their parents have migrated to Germany since 1950)¹⁴—but, of course, this number does not equate to those who are racialized. There is now an increasing number of studies on racist

9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, 4th edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 7f.

10. Sabine Jarosch, “Postkoloniale Theologie nach der Shoah? Eine Analyse von Täter- und Opfer-Vorstellungen als Beitrag zu einer postkolonialen Theologie in Deutschland,” in *Postkoloniale Theologien II*, ed. Andreas Nehring and Simone Wiesgickl (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 79.

11. Mark Terkessidis, *Wessen Erinnerung zählt? Koloniale Vergangenheit und Rassismus heute*, 2nd edition (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2021).

12. Sahra Dornick, “Zur ‘Internationalisierung’ des Hochschulraums im Kontext neoliberaler Wissenschaftspolitik und Dekolonisierung,” in *Rassismus an Hochschulen: Analyse – Kritik – Intervention*, ed. Daniela Heitzmann and Kathrin Houda (Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2020), 20–39.

13. Kien Nghi Ha, “Billig und willig’: Arbeitsmigrations- und Integrationspolitik aus postkolonialer Perspektive,” in *Postkoloniale Politikwissenschaft: Theoretische und empirische Zugänge*, ed. Aram Ziai (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 173–90.

14. Statistisches Bundesamt, “24,3 % der Bevölkerung hatten 2022 eine Einwanderungsgeschichte: Pressemitteilung Nr. 158 vom 20. April 2023” accessed Oct 28, 2023, https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2023/04/PD23_158_125.html.

attacks and experiences of discrimination that show, for example, that 58% of those who define themselves as belonging to a racialized group have experienced racism directly.¹⁵

Departing from the conundrum of whiteness, racism, and privilege I will try to figure out which specific challenges result from this situation for Christian social ethics as a discipline. To this end, the concepts will first be defined.

2. Concepts: racism, whiteness, privilege

There is no uncontroversial definition of racism as a concept because it always triggers discussions about how broad or narrow an understanding of racism should be. In Germany in particular, addressing racism beyond overtly racist attacks often leads to rejecting reactions, as the use of the concept for small everyday discrimination or for structural discrimination is viewed skeptically. One helpful approach is the classic definition by Philomena Essed, who understands racism “as ideology, structure, and process in which inequalities inherent in the wider social structure are related, in a deterministic way, to biological and cultural factors attributed to those who are seen as a different ‘race’ or ‘ethnic’ group.”¹⁶

There is a multitude of concrete existing approaches to combat racism—whether they address the education system, the judiciary, personal empowerment, the media landscape, or the like. However, if we want to work towards overcoming or reducing racist structures, in addition to questions about the effects of racism and those affected by racist exclusion, we should also focus on those who profit from racism and often—consciously or unconsciously—contribute to its perpetuation. This brings the so-called *White* privileges into focus. Whiteness is not defined as skin color, but as a description of not being affected by racism.¹⁷ The demarcations

15. Naika Foroutan, Noa Ha, Frank Kalter, Yasemin Shooman, and Cihan Sinanoglu, “Rassistische Realitäten: Wie setzt sich Deutschland mit Rassismus auseinander?” 2022, *Auftaktstudie zum Nationalen Diskriminierungs- und Rassismusmonitor des Deutschen Zentrums für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung*, accessed October 28, 2023. <https://www.rassismusmonitor.de/studie-rassistische-realitaeten>, 31. The growing attention does not necessarily mean that the problem is worsening in recent years – it can even be a sign of an improvement, though this does not diminish the need to address the problem; cf. Aladin El-Mafaalani, *Das Integrationsparadox: Warum gelungene Integration zu mehr Konflikten führt* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2018).

16. Philomena Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1991), 43.

17. Arnold Farr, “Wie Weißsein sichtbar wird: Aufklärungsrassismus und die Struktur eines rassifizierten Bewusstseins,” in *Mythen, Masken und Subjekte: Kritische Weißseinsforschung in Deutschland*, ed. Maureen M. Eggers (Münster: Unrast-Verlag, 2005).

are fluid and context dependent. Whiteness can thus be understood as a normative power that creates normality and draws boundaries in many areas of society. Who is represented in the media, in which way, whose body is treated as the norm in medical contexts, etc.: Such dynamics have to do with these visible boundaries.

This makes it clear to what extent one can speak of *White* privilege: It is about unearned advantages over non-White people. A well-known metaphor comes from Peggy McIntosh, who speaks of an “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.”¹⁸ It is invisible, however, only for those who enjoy these privileges, while they can certainly be seen from the outside. In part, these privileges are actually basic rights that all people should be entitled to; in part, they are goods that should be distributed fairly according to criteria other than “race.”

In addition to *White* privilege, numerous other identity characteristics lead to advantages, and it makes sense to never view privilege one-dimensionally, but to consider the interaction of different factors. Intersectional research approaches focus on the interconnections and mutual reinforcement of different aspects of discrimination.¹⁹ In this way, the complexity of an individual's social location should be taken into account, while at the same time differentiating the respective levels. For example, *White* privilege in Germany correlates with aspects such as economic status, German as a mother tongue, German nationality, etc. The privileges of male and heterosexual persons can also reinforce them.

In the context of the Catholic Church in the German-speaking context, reflections on racism and *White* privilege have increased, as certain media attention to experiences of racism in the church space shows, particularly in the context of the debates on #Blacklivesmatter.²⁰ There have been clear statements against structural racism and the racist discrimination against migrants from the German church at least since the 1980s.²¹ However, in most places church leaders (who in Germany are almost exclusively *White*)

18. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (1989), 188.

19. Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.

20. Regamy Thillainathan, “‘Der Schwarze stirbt zuerst’: Kölner Priester über #blacklivesmatter und weiße Katholikenräte,” June 18, 2020, <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/25868-pfarrer-thillainathan-der-schwarze-stirbt-zuerst>; Bonifatiusbote - Der Sonntag - Glaube und Leben, “Rassismus bei uns? Was Menschen aus den Bistümern Fulda, Mainz und Limburg erleben, weil sie nicht weiß sind,” July 8, 2020, accessed October 28, 2023, <https://www.aussicht.online/artikel/rassismus-bei-uns>.

21. Päpstliche Kommission Justitia et Pax, *Die Kirche und der Rassismus: Für eine brüderliche Gesellschaft* (Bonn, 1989).

seem to be far from understanding the issue as a structural challenge for themselves. A serious enabling of participation and a dismantling of privileges, as Regina Polak for example demands,²² or even a confrontation with the role of church and theology in the emergence of modern racism and Eurocentrism²³ are apparently not envisaged.

The situation is not much different in the university context and in academic theology. In addition to *White* perspectives, other privileged perspectives are also clearly overrepresented here, such as men and the upper-class.²⁴ Academic theological engagement with racist discrimination and whiteness in the German-speaking context is growing, especially in Protestant theology, but it is still a marginal topic.²⁵ I therefore claim that Christian Social Ethics is also dominated by privileged persons and perspectives. In the following, I would like to present possible risks that specifically affect social ethical research when one's own privileges are not reflected.

3. Risks concerning privileged Christian Social Ethics

Christian Social Ethics is a very heterogeneous discipline in the German-speaking context, in which fundamental questions of self-understanding and methodology are discussed frequently.²⁶ Therefore, it is difficult to make generally valid statements about social ethical research. Nevertheless,

22. Regina Polak, "Rassismus und Anerkennung als politische und strukturelle Herausforderung," in *Lebenslänglich! Das Ringen von Migrierten und Geflüchteten um gleichberechtigte Partizipation in Gesellschaft und Kirche*, ed. Tobias Keßler (Regensburg: Pustet, 2021), 131–168.

23. See for example Enrique Dussel, "La crítica de la teología como crítica de la política. Hacia una descolonización epistemológica de la teología," in *Hacia La Descolonización De La Historia Del Cristianismo En América Latina Y El Caribe*, ed. José A. Gomes Moreira (Encuentro Continental de los fundadores de la Comisión de Estudios de Historia de la Iglesia en América Latina: Belo Horizonte: 2020), 28; Hille Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics: Catholic Ethics and Social Challenges* (Basel, Würzburg: Schwabe, Echter, 2020), 272.

24. Daniela Heitzmann and Kathrin Houda, eds., *Rassismus an Hochschulen: Analyse – Kritik – Intervention* (Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Juventa, 2020).

25. Examples are, among others: Hannah Drath and Jan Woppowa, "Rassismuskritik und Christliche Religionspädagogik," *Österr. Religionspädagogisches Forum* 30, no. 2 (2022): 129–148; Iva E. Carruthers, Guido Dotti, and Susan Durber, eds., "Rassismus," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 69, no. 3 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020). First publications did appear much earlier; for example, a remarkable confrontation with the topic in the 1980s from an intersectional perspective is provided in Christine Schaumberger, "'Das Recht, anders zu sein, ohne dafür bestraft zu werden': Rassismus als Problem weißer feministischer Theologie," in *Weil wir nicht vergessen wollen: ... zu einer Feministischen Theologie im deutschen Kontext*, ed. Christine Schaumberger (Münster: Morgana-Frauenbuchverlag, 1987).

26. See for example: "Christliche Sozialethik – Eine sozialwissenschaftliche und theologische Disziplin," *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 63 (2022).

I will take three exemplary characteristics as my starting point, which do not always, but commonly characterize social ethical projects and work, and ask in each case: if we consider them to be shaped by a *White* perspective, which dangers can be identified? In this way, I want to raise general questions without certainly meaning to stigmatize certain approaches as problematic. Rather, I would like these rough ideas to be understood as self-reflection and as an invitation to face the challenge of a decolonial perspective to one's own research.

3.1 *Normativity*

Christian Social Ethics has an explicit normative claim. The classic methodological three-step is “see—judge—act,” so that an empirical situation analysis is usually followed by a criterion-based assessment of social conditions, political measures, or magisterial positions.²⁷ The third step clarifies the claim of social ethics not to remain in the scientific sphere, but to enable a reference back to practical fields of action and thus to introduce proposals for more justice in society into public (or inner-church) discourses. The determining line of thought is solution-oriented; analysis and judgement are not an end in themselves but enable a well-founded development of ideas with practical relevance.

What does this mean from a privilege-critical perspective? The assessment and the search for solutions to injustices require a certain speaking position which is characterized by expertise in the respective field and at the same time an external perspective: the ethicist intervenes with their work in a discourse about a social challenge not in the role of a person affected, but from a meta-perspective. This leads to the fact that the ethicist's own position in the context of the field in question often remains underexposed, especially if it is a privileged position. However, someone who, for example, addresses certain questions as a *White*, German, and Christian person—be it on migration ethics, international relations, or other areas—does not automatically speak from a meta-perspective, but is, by virtue of their own identity, just as entangled in the corresponding questions of justice as, for example, a person who has fled to Germany from Afghanistan. This does not mean that group membership or identity are decisive for who is allowed to speak normatively on certain issues and

27. Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Michelle Becka, Johannes Frühbauer, and Gerhard Kruij, *Christliche Sozialethik: Grundlagen, Kontexte, Themen: ein Lehr- und Studienbuch* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2022), 65. This principle was developed by Joseph Cardijn and confirmed magisterially by the encyclical *Mater et Magistra*.

who is not. But affectedness, which shapes one's own view, is not limited to "victims" of injustice but includes the privileged who—often unconsciously—benefit from power dynamics. As a *White* ethicist in Europe, I am shaped by a certain history. This does not determine me, but it has an impact on my own horizon of experience.

3.2 *The modern conception of reason*

Social ethical thinking is fundamentally based on a conception of reasonable judgement and communication that leads to a perspective of universal agreement on the corresponding normative convictions. Classical Catholic social teaching was founded on a natural law conception of social order, in which this order can claim universal validity based on its natural design. Today, German-speaking social ethics largely distances itself from this and instead refers to philosophical-ethical traditions rooted in the Enlightenment: through reason-based argumentation, an understanding can in principle take place among rational beings about claims to validity.²⁸

However, this approach can lead to blind spots if it remains Eurocentric and other traditions of ethical thinking and judgement are not perceived or taken seriously. An in-depth engagement of social ethicists with so-called "contextual" theologies or theories from the global South which are not rooted in European Enlightened modernity is sometimes considered more suspicious than relevant—with exceptions, of course. But a questioning of the validity of European traditions from the outside is quickly rejected with reference to the fact that a reason-based orientation towards understanding is the basic prerequisite for ethical argumentation and that one should therefore not fall behind the Enlightenment, even if its dark sides are indeed acknowledged now and again. After all, influential Enlightenment thinkers did not limit their concept of reason to men alone, but also to *Whites*.²⁹

3.3 *Partiality*

A third characteristic is partiality: the liberation theological *topos* of the "option for the poor" is often invoked today to describe a basic concern for social ethics. The selection of research fields is often influenced by the

28. Heimbach-Steins et al., *Christliche Sozialethik*, 72f.

29. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology," in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emmanuel C. Eze (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 103–140.

question of where injustice prevails and which groups in a particular social context belong to the “poor” in the broadest sense, whose situation could at best be improved by the perspectives for action developed by the research.³⁰

Now, while recognizing this orientation as an important step forward, the claim to advocate for “the poor” still involves the risk of contributing to othering mechanisms. When identifying injustices, it is hard to avoid defining groups of people as “victims” (such as “the refugees” or “people with a migration background”) and to do so as scholars from a superior perspective. We make ethical demands as the advocates of these groups, without usually being legitimized by them, and can even use this for relieving ourselves from contexts of guilt.³¹ In this way, we risk perceiving the persons concerned not as subjects of their own liberation but as in need of the merciful intercession of others. In the worst case, this can even silence self-initiatives and be identified as a form of “White Christian saviorism.”

These criticisms are, of course, generalizations and simplifications. They are meant to identify challenges that we should address in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s classic claim that is quoted in the title of this paper: “unlearning one’s privilege as one’s loss.”³² This can mean first developing an understanding of how privileges (race, gender, class, etc.) represent a loss because they deny us access to certain forms of knowledge and experiences. “Unlearning” in this sense basically means “working critically back through one’s history, prejudices, and learned, but now seemingly instinctual, responses.”³³ In this way, Spivak aims to counter deterministic standpoints according to which people are morally not allowed to speak out in certain contexts or on certain issues because of their privileges. She advises *White* male students who are uneasy about their own speaking position: “Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?”³⁴, and then to act out of this anger. This means hard work, as it implies learning about and talking to “the others who occupy those spaces most closed to our privileged view [...] in such a way that they might take us seriously and, most important of all, be able to answer

30. Heimbach-Steins et al., *Christliche Sozialethik*, 452.

31. Jarosch, “Postkoloniale Theologie nach der Shoah?” in *Postkoloniale Theologien II*, 84.

32. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, “Introduction: Reading Spivak,” in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gayatri C. Spivak (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

33. Landry and MacLean, “Introduction: Reading Spivak,” 4.

34. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sarah Harasym, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interventions, Strategies, Dialogues*, (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 62.

back.”³⁵ At the same time, with Spivak, it must always be considered that unlearning is only possible in a fragmentary way.³⁶

How could this demand be made concrete, with and beyond Spivak, regarding the academic discipline of social ethics? How could the realization and possible anger about *White* privilege that negatively influences the academic quality of our work lead to active steps to at least reduce this influence? In the following section, proposals are presented to address the problems outlined above.

4. Possible steps of unlearning

The following collection of possible steps is certainly not exhaustive, and these are anything but patent solutions, but should be understood as discussion starters.

4.1 *Proposals from a decolonial perspective*

A necessary first step would be to admit and to endure the power of the violent structures that we continue to be part of. When in a privileged position, this is not always easy to cope with and the search for solutions can be the more comfortable way. First, however, a deep engagement with the situation is necessary, which in the case of discrimination should include listening attentively to those affected and exposing ourselves as individuals to the experiences of racialized persons, without avoiding the discomfort that this can mean for *White* people. Sara Ahmed stresses: “the desire to act, to move, or even to move on, can stop the message ‘getting through.’”³⁷ This is also important in terms of addressing the painful fact that all structural improvements will not undo past injustices and that racist and paternalistic oppression are centuries-old and very effective mechanisms of domination whose impacts will undoubtedly continue to shape the future. That should by no means paralyze, but it should provide an honest framework for the scope of any political, activist, or other

35. Landry and MacLean, “Introduction: Reading Spivak,” 4f.

36. María do Mar Castro Varela, “(Un-)Wissen. Verlernen als komplexer Lernprozess,” *Migrazine* 1 (2017), accessed October 28, 2023, <https://www.migrazine.at/artikel/un-wissen-verlernen-als-komplexer-lernprozess>. Additionally, there is always the danger that this concept will be misused by privileged people as an excuse for their own ignorance – for this reason, Spivak herself has distanced herself from the idea of unlearning; Castro Varela and Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie*, 175.

37. Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,” *Borderlands* 3, no. 2 (2004), accessed October 28, 2023, 56, <https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/13911/>.

efforts. It can be related to the claims that critical social ethics should be first of all self-critical³⁸ and practice “epistemological modesty.”³⁹ Of course, this should also not obscure the reality that *White* people are involved to varying degrees in the perpetuation of injustice and have different possibilities to contribute to or prevent improvements. Awareness of the limits of one’s own agency does not mean being blind to individual responsibility.

One implication of “epistemological modesty” should be a certain suspicion towards an unquestioned one-dimensional understanding of reason and thereby an awareness for including the effects of privilege when developing criteria for judgement. There are approaches present in social ethics that are constructively critical of the legacy of the Age of Enlightenment and that emphasize aspects such as vulnerability and interdependence, as feminist and gender approaches. For example, these can give indications of how above all responsibilities can be conceived as starting points for ethical demands. Those who profit from certain privileges have a responsibility to work together with others to ensure more justice. Iris Marion Young explains her understanding of “responsibility for justice”: “all those who contribute by their actions to structural processes with some unjust out-comes share responsibility for the injustice. This responsibility is not primarily backward-looking, as the attribution of guilt or fault is, but rather primarily forward-looking.”⁴⁰ According to Young, even those who are underprivileged in a certain dimension have the responsibility to become politically involved according to their possibilities and to communicate their own understanding of this discriminatory situation to others.⁴¹ Through such perspectives within academic ethics, ethical relativism can be clearly rejected, but nevertheless, or precisely because of this, one can ask about one’s own responsibility for epistemic injustices. Thus, an openness and necessity can arise to take marginalized traditions seriously and to address them. If we consider traditional social ethical approaches with a certain “hermeneutic of suspicion” as shaped by *White* privilege, it becomes clear that our privileges are indeed a loss and it is

38. Michelle Becka, “Welcher (V)Erkenntnisgewinn? Postkolonialismus und Christliche Sozialethik,” *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 61 (2020): 155.

39. Sarah Azaransky, “Impossible, Inadequate, and Indispensable: What North American Christian Social Ethics Can Learn from Postcolonial Theory,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2017): 48.

40. Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2011), 96.

41. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 113; see also Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics: Catholic Ethics and Social Challenges*, 383.

not any more a “nice to have” but there is an urgent necessity to seriously learn from non-European traditions.⁴²

It is then a crucial step to enter into dialogue with marginalized traditions and voices. This requires more than a superficial preoccupation with individual and easy-to-receive concepts. Rather, ethicists should make an effort to actually acquire language skills and engage in unfamiliar modes of expression in order to be able to conduct such dialogue. In the academic context, Brunner calls for “intellectual solidarity” to at least mitigate epistemic violence.⁴³ This, of course, also implies a great deal of caution as the ambivalence of this process must be considered; fruitful dialogues basically presuppose an eye level that is technically impossible to achieve due to structural marginalizations. The risk of “exploiting” experts from discriminated groups and their knowledge should not be underestimated. In the first place, despite the importance of direct dialogue, self-education of the privileged is also indispensable, since not all experiences and approaches that are available in published or other forms must be elaborated personally for each person. And secondly, listening to and learning from marginalized voices cannot be the goal—it should be about making them more heard and, above all, recognizing and supporting their agency in the face of exclusionary mechanisms. This may mean, for example, seeking cooperation with organizations, activists, and similar groups that are not necessarily traditional partners of Christian social ethicists.

Again, it must not be forgotten that there are particularly vulnerable and marginalized people—the subalterns according to Spivak’s understanding—who are not even perceived as a group, who are not organized and, in this sense, have no voice. Therefore, on the one hand, ethicists must strive to perceive and include as many perspectives as possible in an intersectionally sensitive way; but, on the other hand, they must also make it transparent that this is never completely feasible and that it is always a matter of approximation.⁴⁴

42. One example is the reference to Dipesh Chakrabarty and Achille Mbembe by Simon Faets in an ethical reflection on the climate crisis: Simon Faets, “Postkoloniale Machtkritik in Zeiten des Klimawandels: Reflexionen zu einer planetarischen Ethik im Dialog mit Achille Mbembe und Dipesh Chakrabarty,” in *Macht: Omnipräsent und doch tabu? Theorien und Praktiken einer sozialetischen Grundkategorie*, ed. Sebastian Dietz et al. (Münster: Aschendorff, 2023), 127–142.

43. Claudia Brunner, *Epistemische Gewalt: Wissen und Herrschaft in der kolonialen Moderne* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), 85.

44. The dilemma of representation from a postcolonial perspective is dealt with by Katja Winkler; see e.g. Katja Winkler and Matthias Möhring-Hesse, “Reflexive Repräsentation der ‘Gerechtigkeiten von unten.’ Wie kann die Urteilskraft Subalternen in der theologisch-sozialetischen Theoriebildung aufgegriffen werden?” in *Christliche Sozialethik - Orientierung welcher Praxis? Friedhelm Hengsbach SJ zu Ehren*, ed. Bernhard Emunds (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018), 172–175.

4.2 *The lasting potential of Christian Social Ethics*

These proposals pose challenges for social ethics. However, other aspects should be added here that can be identified as positive contributions of this discipline in such unlearning processes and that respond to certain risks present in decolonial approaches.

First, the attention of social ethics to the structural level of inequalities should be mentioned. The focus on privilege can tend to be either on individuals who hold very specific privileged positions, or on the dominant forces such as (neo)colonialism, patriarchy, etc., from which there is in fact no quick escape. As necessary as both perspectives are, it is especially important to name concrete structural discrimination mechanisms, to analyze their effects and to look for possibilities to at least mitigate them.

Thereby, social ethics can be sensitive to the “material” effects of unjust power structures and concrete (though never perfect) strategies to combat them. This can involve proposals or initiatives in fields such as the education system, migration policy, the design of welfare systems, etc., through which social ethicists engage outside the academic “bubble.” As mentioned, this should always be done in exchange and cooperation with those affected or their representatives, and the risk of a paternalistic attitude should be taken very seriously but should not paralyze concrete political engagement.

Finally, section 3.2 showed how necessary it is to take a critical look at unquestioned universalizations. Nevertheless, the perspective of universalizability should not be abandoned. Only if we strive for at least a possible understanding based on arguments of potentially all those affected, can we name and criticize injustices and injurious systems without being confined to the limited interests of organized groups.⁴⁵ Of course, our own perspective must always be seen as a provincial and conditional one that can never be understood as universal per se.

5. Outlook: persistent questions

This attempt to let a theological discipline in a specific context be challenged by decolonial criticism of *White* privilege should be read as a necessary self-questioning that has not been completed but leads to further open questions:

45. Gerhard Kruij, “Entkolonialisierung des Christentums und der Vernunft? Zur notwendigen Kritik postkolonialer Diskurse,” in *Transformationen Der Missionswissenschaft: Festschrift Zum 100. Jahrgang der ZMR*, ed. Mariano Delgado (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2016), 304f.

This text is written from a solely *White* perspective, which is necessary for such critical self-reflection. At the same time, this creates a self-contradiction, as once again a privileged voice speaks at a conference and publishes in an anthology, allowing non-*White* perspectives to have their say only through selected and filtered references and quotations. Where is it possible and necessary to actively open spaces as a privileged person or to leave them? Where is this even counterproductive due to certain gatekeeper mechanisms? And how can we avoid stabilizing an exclusionary system by criticizing it without bringing about change? As Judith Gruber asks regarding a postcolonial German theology: “Does it serve to shake the dominant knowledge politics or does it even consolidate them?”⁴⁶

Currently, except for certain niches, church and theology in German-speaking contexts are *White*-dominated spaces. Therefore, beyond the goal of changing this in the long term, how can we deal with the current absence of marginalized perspectives and avoid tokenism? To what degree are we willing to question more fundamentally why topics, methods, or formats in our academic practice are not interesting or attractive to people without certain privileges? Which written or unwritten rules and self-evident truths in academic theology should we actively try to change?

I have focused here only on social ethics in the German-speaking context. Of course, striving to unlearn *White* privilege also has consequences for international cooperation, or is a challenge to the lack of it. How can we deal in practical terms with the impossibility of communication at eye level here? How can we be open respectfully to ethical convictions that we do not agree with as “progressive” theologians,⁴⁷ considering at the same time that academics from non-European contexts can also be strongly influenced by colonial traditions of thought and can themselves have privileged positions within their societies (concerning education, often gender, etc.)?

Probably it is precisely “the tensions among impossibility, inadequacy, and indispensability,”⁴⁸ to quote Sarah Azaransky, which are necessary to move further in the process of unlearning our privileges and of doing social ethics while aware of our limitations, but in the most fruitful and least damaging way possible.

46. Gruber, “Wider die Entinnerung,” in *Postkoloniale Theologien II*, 26; own translation.

47. Duggan, “Erkenntnistheoretische Diskrepanz,” 140.

48. Azaransky, “Impossible, Inadequate, and Indispensable,” 59.

THE DECOLONIZATION OF THE CHURCH
IN CONGO/ZAIRE/THE DRC:
A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Mick Feyaerts, Idesbald Goddeeris, Judith Gruber,
Georges Nembunzu Mizingi, and Simon Nsielanga Tukumu

Introduction

Decolonization has entered the public debate in many Western countries, certainly following the *Black Lives Matter* movement in summer 2020. In international academia, the concept has already been discussed for a longer time. Decolonization no longer solely stands for the political and economic transitions from colonial regimes to independent states, but now takes a broader approach to navigating the curbing of European hegemony. It addresses various phenomena that are linked with the colonial regime and are still tangible in post-independence societies on both sides of the colonial divide, such as unequal power relations, Eurocentric prejudices, feelings of superiority, and racism. It finds its origins in the Latin American school of thought on “coloniality/modernity”¹ that draws on world-systems theory, development theory and the Frankfurt School critical social theory tradition to critique the perceived universality of Western knowledge and to recover Indigenous knowledges.² It has also spread to other continents.³ Decolonial thought has strong overlaps with postcolonial studies, which emerged as an academic field around the work of Edward Said, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi Bhabha.⁴ Originally

1. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–178.

2. Bonaventura de Souza Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

3. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Decolonization, Development and Knowledge in Africa: Turning Over a New Leaf* (London: Routledge, 2020).

4. Edward Said, *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995 [1978]); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

developed in literary studies, it draws on post-structural concepts to interrogate the epistemic, social, and political power relationships that sustain colonialism and neo-colonialism. This critical re-reading of colonial history⁵ aims at disrupting the hegemonic intellectual and linguistic, social and economic discourses by means of which we make sense of the world. In this critique of colonial knowledge production, postcolonial studies put less emphasis on recovering Indigenous, un-westernized knowledges than decolonial thought.⁶ Highlighting instead the irresolvable entanglements of colonial and Indigenous knowledges in the wake of colonialism, postcolonial theory seeks to uncover the epistemic practices of both domination *and* subversion *within* the hegemonic paradigm of colonial Eurocentrism.

Decolonization of society targets particular fields such as the public space, museums, local customs, libraries, etc.⁷ In academia, various aspects have so far been addressed, including political aspects, military interventions, economic relations, development aid, student movements, regional presence, literary representations, and memory.⁸ Strikingly, the Roman Catholic Church keeps largely out of range.

5. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2002 [1989]).

6. Gurinder Bhambra, "Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues," *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 2 (2014): 115–121.

7. Enrico Castro Montes, Idesbald Goddeeris, Magaly Rodriguez Garcia, Janne Schreurs, Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse, Marjolein Wilke, eds., *Dekolonisering in verleden en heden. Postkoloniale en subalterne perspectieven voor geschiedenisonderwijs* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2023); Idesbald Goddeeris, "The Decolonization of Belgian Society," *Memoria e Ricerca, Rivista di storia contemporanea* 2 (2023): 237–254, doi: 10.14647/107744.

8. For Belgium and Congo, see *inter alia*: Bruce Kuklick and Emmanuel Gerard, *Death in the Congo: Murdering Patrice Lumumba* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015); Kris Quanten, *De Belgische militaire aanwezigheid in Congo van 1960 tot 1964: technische bijstand of operationele inzet?* (PhD diss., KU Leuven, 2011); Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo: 1885-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Aristide Michel, "Un demi-siècle de coopération technique belgo-congolaise: historique et bilan," in *50 ans de relations belgo-congolaises. Rétrospective et perspectives*, Actes du Colloque du Cinquenaire de l'indépendance de République Démocratique du Congo, 17 et 18 juin 2010, Palais d'Egmont, Bruxelles, ed. Henri Sakanyi Mova and Eddie Tambwe (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), 163–176; Patrick Develtere, Huib Huyse, and Jan Van Ongevalle, *International Development Cooperation Today. A Radical Shift Towards a Global Paradigm* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021); Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World. Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Reuben Loffman, "Belgian Rule and Its Afterlives: Colonialism, Developmentalism, and Mobutism in the Tanganyika District, Southeastern DR-Congo, 1885-1985," *International Labor and Working Class History* 92 (2017): 47–68; Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul, eds., *The Postcolonial Low Countries. Literature, Colonialism, Multiculturalism* (Lanham et al: Lexington Books, 2012), 1–22; Luc Renders and Jeroen Dewulf, eds., *The Congo in Flemish Literature. An Anthology of Flemish Prose on the Congo, 1870s-1990s* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020). Luc Renders, *De mislukking van de beschavingsmissie. Het Nederlandstalige Congoproza*

This chapter presents an ongoing research project, led by Judith Gruber and Idesbald Goddeeris, that studies the decolonization of the Roman Catholic Church in Congo/Zaire/the DRC. It asks how selected actors have navigated decolonization after Congo gained independence, i.e. how they experienced and shaped shifts in the post-colonial era. The project seeks to problematize the prevailing assumptions about decolonization as a teleological process from European hegemony to African independence, which has dominated the field and its narrow focus on a political transfer of institutional power. Instead, by taking a bottom-up approach informed by postcolonial studies, the project aims to intervene into existing research by producing reconstructions of decolonization as a complex process that allow one to trace the non-linearity of the shift of power, the re-negotiation of frames of thought, the persistence of colonial patterns after political independence, and the ambiguities of postcolonial practices and attitudes that can have both decolonizing *and* recolonizing effects.

The project argues that studying the decolonization of the church can only be done in a multidisciplinary and multifaceted way. It connects to Aníbal Quijano's concept of the colonial matrix of power, which was launched in 2000 but is still very much in use today.⁹ Quijano distinguished four interrelated domains that the colonial power attempted to control: knowledge and subjectivity (including epistemology and education), authority (including institutions), economy (including land appropriation), and gender and sexuality (including family and education). The church permeated all these domains. A study of its decolonization should therefore cover all of them. This is ambitious, but is feasible by means of case studies which also allow the use of different disciplines, first and foremost theology, history, and anthropology. The research project presented here consists of three cases that each address a different domain of Quijano's matrix and each work within their own discipline, of course at the same time connecting to other domains and methodologies and intersecting with each other.

The chapter starts with a state of the art of the scholarly—especially historical and theological—literature on the decolonization of the church,

van 1960 tot 2020 (Hasselt: Gramadoelas, 2021); Matthew Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019).

9. Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America," *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580; W. Mignolo, "The Colonial Matrix of Power," in *Talking About Global Inequality*, ed. Christian Olaf Christiansen, Mélanie Lindbjerg Machado-Guichon, Sofia Mercader, Oliver Bugge Hunt, Priyanka Jha (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-08042-5_5. See also Walter D. Mignolo, "Introduction. Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 156.

with a particular focus on Belgium and Congo. It then presents three different approaches (including colonial domains, methodologies and cases) to the research of the decolonization of the church. First, Georges Nembunzu Mizingi will deal with decolonization as a struggle against the discrimination of Africans in the production of knowledge by studying the Africanization project of Cardinal Joseph Malula, the first Congolese archbishop. Second, Simon Nsielanga Tukumu will highlight the institutional and economic dimensions of decolonization in an analysis of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in Congo. Third, Mick Feyaerts will reflect on the aspect of gender by studying—*inter alia* in an anthropological way—how decolonization affected the practices, rituals, and materialities of sister congregations in one particular Congolese city.

State of the art

The limited attention to the church in discussions of decolonization is remarkable: Catholicism was one of the most important mediums of contact between Europeans and non-Europeans in the colonial era, and Catholicism today forms one of the most tangible legacies of European expansion in Africa.¹⁰ Missionaries were a pivotal part of the colonial system¹¹ and, more than any other group, remained in the former colony after independence. Still, it has not yet been researched how the Roman Catholic Church in Congo dealt with political and mental decolonization. The recently published volume on *Religion, Colonization and Decolonization* in Congo is a typical case in only studying the period 1885-1960.¹² The common public still remembers and represents missionaries in a unidimensionally positive way, as David Van Reybrouck's theater play *Missie* (2007) or the television series *Nonkel Pater* (2012) can illustrate.¹³ Scholarly research on missionaries in Congo has taken place, but it mostly stops in 1960.

10. Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

11. Karen Vallgård, "Were Christian missionaries colonizers? Reorienting the debate and exploring new research trajectories," *Interventions* 18, no. 6 (2016): 865-886; Geertje Mak, Marit Monteiro, and Elisabeth Wesseling, "Child Separation. (Post)Colonial Policies and Practices in the Netherlands and Belgium," *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 135, no. 3-4 (2020): 4-28.

12. Vincent Viaene, Bram Cleys, and Jan De Maeyer, eds., *Religion, Colonization and Decolonization in Congo, 1885-1960. Religion, colonisation et décolonisation au Congo, 1885-1960* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020).

13. Maarten Langhendries, "The missionary: figure of reconciliation with the colonial past in Flanders (2007-2012)," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis* 97 (2019): 751-772.

Of course, there are exceptions. Bambi Ceuppens already in 2004 critically elaborated on missionaries in Congo. Idesbald Goddeeris in 2021 published a monograph on the memory and decolonization of missionaries.¹⁴ Depaepé studied how colonial education—which was largely missionary based—evolved after the political decolonization¹⁵ and recently supervised a PhD dissertation on girls' secondary education.¹⁶ Servais, who has published extensively on missionaries, also studied their political activities in the postcolonial period.¹⁷ Vanysacker did research on the killings of missionaries in the 1960s¹⁸ and co-authored, along with Anton Milh, an article on the Dominicans in Congo that also covers the postcolonial period.¹⁹ In this way, he connects to the numerous books on the history of congregations in Belgian Congo, often written on the occasion of anniversaries, for instance on the Jesuits,²⁰ the Scheut Missionaries²¹ and the Annonciades.²² These publications also discuss the years after independence, but often to a much lesser extent than the colonial era.²³ Moreover, they rarely have a critical attitude because of

14. Idesbald Goddeeris, *Missionarissen: geschiedenis, herinnering, dekolonisering* (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2021).

15. Marc Depaepé, “‘Rien ne va plus...’ the collapse of the colonial educational structures in Zaïre (1960-1995),” in *Between Educationalization and Appropriation: Selected 13 Writings on the History of Modern Educational Systems*, ed. Marc Depaepé (Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 2012), 241–264; Marc Depaepé, “Writing histories of Congolese colonial and post-colonial education. A historiographical view from Belgium,” in *Connecting histories of education: transnational and cross-cultural exchanges in (post-)colonial education*, ed. Barnita Bagchi, Eckhardt Fuchs and Kate Rousmaniere (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014), 41–60.

16. Annette Lembagusala Kikumbi, *L'éducation des filles dans les écoles secondaires du Diocèse de Kikwit en R.D.Congo (1960-1997). Contribution des congrégations féminines* (PhD diss., KU Leuven, 2018).

17. Olivier Servais, “Dimension politique de la revue belge Vivant univers des Pères Blancs de 1969 à 2000,” *Histoire & Missions chrétiennes* 14, no. 2 (2010): 103–123.

18. Dries Vanysacker, “Les martyrs oubliés?,” *Les missionnaires dans la tourmente de l'insurrection Simba au Congo 1964-1966*, Bibliothèque de la Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique 100 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016).

19. Anton Milh and Dries Vanysacker, “De dominicaanse missie in Congo. Van kolonisatie naar afrikanisering,” *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 58, no. 1 (2018): 22–43.

20. Léon de Saint Moulin, “Cent ans de présence jésuite en Afrique centrale,” *Zaïre-Afrique* 33 (1993): 545–574; Alain Deneef et al., eds., *De la mission du Kwango à la province d'Afrique centrale. Les jésuites au Congo-Zaïre cent ans d'épopée* (Brussels: AESM Éditions, 1995).

21. François Bontinck, *Les Missionnaires de Scheut au Zaïre: 1888-1988* (L'Épiphanie: Kinshasa: 1988); Daniël Verhelst and Hyacin Daniëls, eds., *Scheut vroeger en nu. Geschiedenis van de Congregatie van het Onbevlekt Hart van Maria C.I.C.M.* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1991).

22. Ria Christens, *Terra Incognita: 75 jaar annuntiaten in Afrika* (Heverlee: Annuntiaten Heverlee, 2006).

23. Luc Vints, in collaboration with Zana Aziza Etambala, *100 jaar Zusters van Liefde J.M. in Zaïre, 1891-1991* (Brussels: Congregatie van de zusters van Liefde van Jezus en Maria / Leuven: KADOC, 1992), 173–186.

congregation members' involvement, either as authors or as commissioning body.²⁴

Congolese authors have also written historical overviews of specific congregations,²⁵ mission posts²⁶ and biographies of individual clergy, including Belgian missionaries²⁷ and Congolese cardinals. Yet, they have more often approached the topic from the perspective of contemporary church history. They especially elaborated on political aspects, such as the church's relation with the state²⁸ and its role in local peace operations.²⁹ All in all, however, these studies are case-oriented and do not systematically and critically analyze the Roman Catholic Church in Congo within the frame of decolonization and, for instance, the relationship between Belgian missionaries and Congolese priests.

Moreover, they fail to connect to developments within international academia, *inter alia* because of the language barrier between English scholarship and the traditionally French (or Dutch) language of Congolese mission history. This is unfortunate, since important steps have been made within international church history and mission history. An increasing number of authors have started to examine the postcolonial period,

24. Idesbald Goddeeris, "Missionaries. A Human Dimension to Colonization?" in: *Colonial Congo. A History in Questions*, ed. Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro and Guy Vanthemsche (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024), 249-262.

25. Anicet N'teba Mbengi, *Les Jésuites au Kwilu sur les pas d'Ignace de Loyola, François Xavier et Pierre Favre* (Kinshasa: Editions Loyola, 2005); Anicet N'teba Mbengi et al., *Allez dans le monde entier... Centenaire de l'évangélisation catholique du Kwango-Diocèse de Popokabaka (1915-2015)* (Kinshasa: Editions Loyola, 2015).

26. Bafuka, Dialakana-dia, *Historique De La Mission Catholique De Mangembo (des Origines à Nos Jours)* (Kinshasa: Université nationale du Zaïre, 1980); Tshibangu Tshishiku, Mgr. [Tarcisse], "L'évolution des thèmes des assemblées des supérieurs et évêques des missions catholiques au Zaïre (de 1905 à 1979)," in *L'Église catholique au Zaïre: un siècle de croissance (1880-1980)* (Kinshasa-N'Gombe: Édition du Secrétariat général de l'Épiscopat, 1980); Kiangu, Sindani, *Frères Joséphites de Kinzambi: cinquantenaire* (Kinshasa: ICEP 1987); Marguerite-Astrid Kapinga wa Nkaya, *Les Soeurs de la Charité de Jésus et de Maria, Un siècle de présence au Zaïre 1892-1992* (Kinshasa-Gombe: Soeur de la charité de JM, 1992).

27. Kiangu, Sindani, *Préparer un peuple parfait. Mgr Joseph Guffens. 1895-1973* (Kinshasa: Editions Saint Paul Afrique, 1992); Mpsi, Jean, *Le cardinal Malula et Jean-Paul II. Dialogue difficile entre l'Église "africaine" et le Saint-Siège.* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).

28. Wamu Oyatambwe, *Eglise Catholique et Pouvoir Politique au Congo-Zaïre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997); Louis, Ngomo-Okitembo, *L'engagement politique de l'Église catholique au Zaïre 1960-1992* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Flavien Nkay Malu, "L'Église catholique, le peuple et l'État dans la République démocratique du Congo (1960-1990)," in: *Les relations Églises-État en situation postcoloniale. Amérique, Afrique, Asie, Océanie, 19e-20e siècles*, ed. Philippe Delislé and Marc Spindler (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 277-307; Jean-Bruno Mukanya Kaninda-Muana, *Église catholique et pouvoir au Congo / Zaïre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

29. Roger B. Alfani, *Religious Peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (New York et al.: Peter Lang, 2019).

researching Indigenous encounters;³⁰ problematizing the continuation of the civilizing paradigm,³¹ integrating methods from global history and postcolonial studies,³² local church leaders,³³ and including postcolonial periods in syntheses.³⁴ The bulk of this literature deals with Protestant missions, which may also account for the gap with the case of Congo, but some scholars have included postcolonial Roman Catholic missionaries, predominantly within the (former) French empire.

Similarly, this historical research has hardly connected with the wealthy field of theology. As part of the independence movements in the 1960s, scholars sought to “decolonize theology” and to develop a theology that is distinctly “African,” as distinguished from the “Western” theology brought to the continent through colonial mission enterprises.³⁵ Thus, arguably emerging in the mid-20th century as an academic field and ecclesial discourse, African theology has the goal of drawing on African cultural, religious, historical, and socio-political experiences as sources for theological reflection.³⁶ There is considerable amount of research that discusses the complexity of the task of defining African theology.³⁷ Léonard Santedi Kinkupu and Mbiti are considered among the founding texts of Francophone and Anglophone African theology, respectively.³⁸ Within the broad

30. Carey A. Watt and Michael Mann, *Civilizing Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia. From Improvement to Development* (London et al.: Anthem Press, 2011).

31. David F. Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson, eds., *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism: Indigenous Encounters with missionary Christianity, 1800-2000* (New York: Berghahn, 2012); Judith Becker, ed., *European Missions in Contact Zones. Transformation through Interaction in a (Post-)Colonial World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

32. Linda Ratschiller and Karolin Wetjen, eds., *Verflochtene Mission: Perspektiven auf eine neue Missionsgeschichte* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2018).

33. Jay Carney, *For God and My Country. Catholic Leadership in Modern Uganda* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

34. Bernhard Maier, *Die Bekehrung der Welt: Eine Geschichte der christlichen Mission in der Neuzeit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2021).

35. Dibaba W. Said, “An African Theology of Decolonization,” *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971): 501–524.

36. Bénézet Bujo, *African theology in its social context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1992), 5.

37. Christopher Magezi and Jacob T. Igba, “African Theology and African Christology. Difficulty and Complexity in contemporary definitions and methodological frameworks,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–7; M.T. Frederiks, “Coming of Age in African Theology: The Quest for Authentic Theology in African Soil,” *Exchange* 37 (2008): 109–123. Gabriel Tchongang, “Brève histoire de la théologie africaine,” *Revue des Sciences religieuses* 84, no. 2 (2010): 175–190; Anthony Akinwale, O.P. “Catholic Theology in Africa,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Medi A. Volpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 890–905.

38. Léonard Santedi Kinkupu and B. M. H. Gérard, *Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent. Cinquante ans après* (Paris: Karthala, 2006); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

field of African theology, multiple lines of research have developed, which have been categorized in terms of several hermeneutic orientations, such as culture/inculturation,³⁹ liberation,⁴⁰ feminist⁴¹ and reconstruction theologies.⁴² Maluleke adds to this list African charismatic and Pentecostal theologies, and the theologies of African Independent Churches (AICs).⁴³ Congolese theologians such as Oscar Bimwenyi-Kweshi, Laurent Cardinal Monsengwo, Tharcisse Tshibangu, Macaire Manimba, F. Kabasele, Fidèle Mabundu, François Yumba, Bitu Lihun Nzundu Augustin, Atanase Kapopwe and Gilbert Shimba have played an important role in shaping Francophone African theology.

The development of African theology has been part of a global theological current that emerged in formerly colonized regions and sought to create contextualized forms of Christianity and theology. The establishment of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians is considered a significant marker in this theological movement.⁴⁴ Along with the formation of these explicitly non-European theologies, a body of literature emerged, predominantly in Europe and North America, that aimed to develop concepts for a theological reflection of these postcolonial cultural pluralization processes of Christian theology.⁴⁵ A number of institutions that were founded (often by re-naming former “missiological” chairs, institutes, and journals) sought to establish “intercultural theology” as a new discipline within the existing theological canon. In RC theology, in particular, the concept of “inculturation” has gained prominence to signify the processes of engagement between the Christian gospel and a particular culture, and to frame the debates about cultural

39. J.N. Kanyua Mugambi, *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longman, 1989); Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

40. Engelbert Mveng, *Spiritualité et libération en Afrique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987); Jean-Marc Ela, *Repenser la théologie africaine: le Dieu qui libère* (Paris: Karthala, 2003).

41. Mary Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

42. Charles Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-building and human rights*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Jesse N. Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publ., 1995).

43. Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “Half a century of African Christian theologies,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 99 (1997): 4–23.

44. EATWOT, *Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) records, 1975–2001*.

45. Walter J. Hollenweger, *Erfahrungen der Leibhaftigkeit. Interkulturelle Theologie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1979); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 30th edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985); Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology. Revised and expanded Edition*, 14th edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

and religious identity, authenticity, and change.⁴⁶ Within African theology, the “Kinshasa school” at the Faculté de Théologie Catholique de Kinshasa has done pioneering work in this field.⁴⁷ Classic approaches to inculturation theology are informed by a semiotic concept of culture that conceives cultures as webs of meaning that form “bounded wholes,” clearly delineable from each other.⁴⁸

More recent approaches introduce methodological tools and conceptual frameworks from cultural studies, postcolonial studies and global history into the study of intercultural theology,⁴⁹ and African theology.⁵⁰ They question the historical presuppositions and epistemological foundations that have oriented the field: rather than seeking to define an authentic African identity that can serve for theological reflection, they trace the entangled histories of knowledge, capital and resources, at whose intersections cultural identities are continuously re-negotiated.⁵¹ African theology, consequently, is studied as “the result of powerful productions of knowledge. ... What we call ‘African theology’ is – just like the invention of ‘Africa’ [...] – not simply given, ... but the product of concrete knowledge discourses and cultural discursive practices. ... [It is] a discursive field that is embedded in [...] multiple other discursive fields.”⁵² These studies point

46. Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990); Cyril Orji, *A Semiotic Approach to the Theology of Inculturation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

47. Gordon Molyneux, “The Contribution to African Theology of the Faculté de Théologie Catholique in Kinshasa, Zaire,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 11, no. 2 (1992): 58–89; Jean Musway Mupeka, *La carrière de Mgr Vanneste. Un aspect de l'implication belge au Congo* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant, 1999); Anthony Akinwale O.P., “Catholic Theology in Africa,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic theology*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Medi A. Volpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 890–905.

48. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2017 [1973]); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 30th edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

49. Judith Gruber, “Intercultural Theology as a (Post)colonial project? Reflections from Central Europe,” *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 1, no. 1 (2017): 105–111; Heike Walz, “Kritik der europäischen Vernunft? Herausforderungen für die Interkulturelle Theologie aus Lateinamerika und Afrika,” *Interkulturelle Theologie* 41, no. 2–3 (2015): 261–83; Samuel Pang, “A Postcolonial Theological Project: Creating Space for the Studies of World Christianity,” *International Review of Mission* 97 (2008): 78–90.

50. Musa Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Chalice Press, 2012).

51. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 2 (1980): 57–72; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge Classics, 1994); Achille Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 62, no. 1 (1992): 3–37.

52. Claudia Jahnel, *Interkulturelle Theologie und Kulturwissenschaft: Untersucht am Beispiel afrikanischer Theologie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2016), 15.

to problematic shortcomings in the conceptual frameworks that have informed the field, such as contextualization, inculturation, interculturality or World Christianity. Specifically, they raise the question in which ways these concepts have perpetuated, rather than disrupted, the colonial imaginations of center and periphery as a normative framework for describing cultural plurality within the Christian tradition, and thus re-establish Western Christianity as the silent organizing principle of global theological research.⁵³ In response to this critique, they seek, instead, to approach the study of African theology in ways that “decentralize the history of Christianity”⁵⁴ and “provincialize Europe.”⁵⁵

These problems do not only occur in the discipline of theology, but also in the field of mission and church history, certainly in Congo. Due to the deficits of the academic output pointed above, Congo’s post-independence history is written in patterns that perpetuate colonial imaginations. However, they are increasingly countered by scientific literature. For instance, the church in the Belgian Congo is reputed for being better prepared for decolonization because it had begun the Africanization of its executives much earlier than the civil authorities. However, Vanthemsche concluded that, apart from some “fig leaves,” Africanization began as late as in the 1950s and that the Vatican was reluctant to grant autonomy, and eventually did so because it was forced by the events.⁵⁶ A second example: according to many authors, both in the Leopoldville riots of January 1959 and during the regional wars in the early 1960, missionaries were targeted because they were close to the people, living in Indigenous neighborhoods, and not fleeing the turmoil. Loffmann, on the contrary, states that missionaries were massacred because many Africans associated the church with the

53. Namsoon Kang, “Whose/Which World in World Christianity? Exploring World Christianity’s Multiple Trajectories,” in *New Day: Essays on World Christianity in Honor of Lamin Sanneh*, ed. Akintunde E. Akinade and Lamin O. Sanneh (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 31–48; Robert Heaney, “Conversion to Coloniality: Avoiding the Colonization of Method,” *International Review of Mission* 97, no. 384–385 (2008): 65–77; Judith Gruber, “Wider die Enttinerung. Zur postkolonialen Kritik hegemonialer Wissenspolitiken in der Theologie,” in *Postkoloniale Theologien II: Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum*, ed. Andreas Nehring and Simon Wiesgickl (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2017), 23–38; Klaus Hock, “Erweitertes Wissen. Afrikanische Divinationssysteme und postkoloniale Perspektiven interkultureller Theologie,” in *Postkoloniale Theologien II: Perspektiven aus dem deutschsprachigen Raum*, ed. Andreas Nehring and Simon Wiesgickl (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2017), 155–170.

54. Darcie Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the end of empire in France and Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 8.

55. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

56. Guy Vanthemsche, “Le Saint-Siège et la fin du Congo belge (1958-1960),” *Revue d’Histoire Ecclésiastique* 109, no. 1–2 (2014): 196–233.

colonial state.⁵⁷ Last but not least, the Roman Catholic Church after 1960 allegedly adapted to the new spirit of the times by highlighting peaceful co-existence, closeness to the African people, stability, dialogue, trust, affinity, helpfulness, equivalence, preference of the poor, solidarity, etc. However, Nkay Malu argues the opposite: “The church itself only slowly reformed itself. Its hierarchy and staff remained, for the largest part, White. The privileges and practices of the colonial era [...] were not abolished, as we already noted, as late as from 1972 onwards” (our translation).⁵⁸ These examples illustrate that new research, especially on the decades following the immediate post-independence period, is required to challenge old narratives and bring together different perspectives.

1. Knowledge—the Africanization of the clergy by Cardinal Joseph Malula

One of the domains in which the matrix of power manifests itself is the production of knowledge. This has already been emphasized in post-colonial studies through the concept of orientalism coined by Said, and further elaborated upon by the colonial library introduced by Yves Mudimbe. Orientalism can be defined as “a system of knowledge about the Orient”,⁵⁹ a knowledge produced by the colonizer. In this system of knowledge, the Oriental is represented in contraposition to the Westerner; the Oriental is what the Westerner is not.⁶⁰ Said refers to orientalism also as a “library” or “archive of information.”⁶¹ This links him to Yves Mudimbe, who, equally, inspired by Foucault, speaks of the “colonial library” in his masterpiece *The Invention of Africa*.⁶² Rather than a physical library, it “is an abstraction for the immense body of texts and system of representations that has over the centuries collectively invented and continues to invent Africa as a paradigm of difference and alterity.”⁶³

57. Reuben Loffman, *Church, State and Colonialism in Southeastern Congo, 1890-1962* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019), 190.

58. Flavien Nkay Malu, “L’Église catholique, le peuple et l’État dans la République démocratique du Congo (1960-1990),” in *Les relations Églises-État en situation postcoloniale. Amérique, Afrique, Asie, Océanie, 19e-20e siècles*, ed. Philippe Delislé and Marc Spindler (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 300.

59. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Book, 1979), 3.

60. See Said, *Orientalism*, 57.

61. Said, *Orientalism*, 41.

62. See Y. V. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

63. Zubairu Wai, “On the Predicament of Africanist Knowledge: Mudimbe, Gnosis and the Challenge of the Colonial Library,” *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 18 (2015): 270.

Taken as a discourse by the colonizer, the concepts of orientalism and colonial library allow us to question the subject of knowledge in the theme of knowledge production. The question is not primarily who produces knowledge, but rather who is excluded from producing it. Both Said and Mudimbe have clearly shown that the production of knowledge was completely the work of the West, to which Orientals or Africans had not made any contribution, at least directly, even if that knowledge concerned them. Being denied the right of self-definition, the colonized people were thus struck by hermeneutical injustice.⁶⁴ The feature of colonization that emerges is thus the exclusion of a certain group of people—the dominated—from the production of knowledge. Decolonization, in this case, would then consist of the inclusion or participation of all, without any discrimination, in the production of knowledge. In other words, in this case, the struggle for decolonization is the struggle against hermeneutical injustice, which African priests also suffered in the work of evangelization during the colonial period and even after the political independence. This injustice consisted precisely in their exclusion from the reflection undertaken within the church to adapt Christianity to the specific genius of the African people. This was mainly the work of foreign missionaries, through what has been called “accommodation” in missiology.⁶⁵ Still drawing on postcolonial studies, we can now address a particular project that sought to tackle this aspect of colonization in the Roman Catholic Church in the DRC: the Africanization of the clergy by Joseph Malula, the first Congolese Cardinal.

In Congo, the formation of the Native priests began long before independence, a few decades after the beginning of colonization in 1885. The first Congolese priest, Stéphane Kaoze, was ordained in 1917.⁶⁶ However, compared to other parts of Africa, the Africanization of the clergy in Congo has been slow for different reasons, among them the lack of enthusiasm of foreign missionaries to follow the pontifical instructions,⁶⁷ the resistance of others, for whom there was no question of introducing

64. Trystan S. Goetze, “Hermeneutical Dissent and the Species of Hermeneutical Injustice,” *Hypatia* 33, no. 1 (2018): 73: “According to Miranda Fricker, a hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is a deficit in our shared tools of social interpretation (the collective hermeneutical resource), such that marginalized social groups are at a disadvantage in making sense of their distinctive and important experiences.”

65. For the concept of accommodation and its limits, see, among others, Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997) and Judith Gruber, *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

66. See Guy Vanthemsche, “Le Saint-Siège et la fin du Congo Belge,” *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 109 (2014) : 202.

67. See Cardinal Malula, “Centenaire de la 2e Évangélisation du Zaïre,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, vol. 2, *Textes biographiques et généraux*, Documents du

more equality in the clergy,⁶⁸ and, related to the intellectual aspect of decolonization under discussion here, the lack of faith in the ability of Africans to undertake advanced studies, given the doubts surrounding their intellectual capacities.⁶⁹

When Malula became archbishop of Kinshasa in 1964, there were few Congolese priests and evangelization had been and continued to be the work of foreign missionaries. While he appreciated their endeavor, he found that “the work of the first hour was everywhere necessarily superficial; Christianity has not yet grown deep roots in the souls of individuals. In the mass of [...] the baptized, it is still ‘plywood.’”⁷⁰ There was a need to adapt the Christian message to the Bantu soul. With this in mind, he conceived his project for the Africanization of the clergy.

The adaptation of the Christian message, intended as the presentation of Christianity based on the African’s way of thinking,⁷¹ according to Malula, could only be the work of the Congolese priests. He thus attributed them with the capacity to operate a connection between the Gospel and African culture, a matter which had been the prerogative of the foreign missionaries until then. By retaining African priests as the main agents of adaptation, Malula brought them out of their marginalization and enabled them to make their contribution to the work of evangelization. The Africanization of the clergy can accordingly be considered a decolonizing project because it enabled the participation of Black priests in the reflection on ways and means to make Christianity less European, less alien, less a White man’s business, and by opening it up to African culture. Malula’s efforts can be placed in the wider struggle against the dominance of Europeans in the study of Africa.⁷² However, from the perspective of

Christianisme Africain 2, ed. Léon de Saint Moulin (Kinshasa: Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1997), 209–210.

68. See Jean Mpsi, *Le Cardinal Malula et Jean-Paul II: Dialogue difficile entre l’Église ‘africaine’ et le Saint-Siège* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005), 57.

69. See O. Bimwenyi-Kweshi, *Discours théologique négro-africain: Problème des fondements* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981), 98–100. He calls it *réduction épistémologique*.

70. Cardinal Malula, “L’âme de l’Afrique noire,” in *Œuvres complètes du Cardinal Malula*, vol. 3, *Textes concernant l’inculturation et les Abbés*, Documents du Christianisme Africain 3, ed. Léon de Saint Moulin (Kinshasa: Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa, 1997), 26: “Le travail de la première heure a été partout forcément superficiel; le christianisme n’a pas encore poussé des racines profondes dans l’âme des individus; dans la masse de [...] baptisés, il est encore du ‘contreplaqué.’” [our translation]

71. See Malula, “Culture africaine et message chrétien,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 75. Malula pronounced the following words in an interview: “Je pense que nous devons présenter le christianisme en prenant comme base de cette présentation le mode de penser de l’Africain.”

72. For the education field, see, for example, Sally Matthews, “Confronting the Colonial Library: Teaching Political Studies Amidst Calls for a Decolonised Curriculum,” *Politikon* 45, no. 1 (2018): 48–65.

this research, which also investigates the recolonizing aspects of the decolonization process, it is worth asking whether the fact that Black priests are the only ones thought to be capable of adapting the Gospel is an exclusion of foreign missionaries and therefore an act that can be called colonial.⁷³

If decolonization can be understood as resisting the reproduction of colonial patterns,⁷⁴ the Africanization of the clergy, although liberating Congolese priests from the hermeneutical injustice in which colonization had enclosed them, also perpetuated the exclusionary approach, which is a colonial pattern. Indeed, just as Africans were excluded by Europeans in the production of knowledge concerning the adaptation of the Gospel to the African milieu, Europeans were in turn excluded by Africans. From this emerges the ambiguity of decolonizing practices—here the Africanization of the clergy promoted by Malula—which can have both decolonizing and recolonizing effects.

All of this reveals a crucial point that must be made about the process of decolonization. The struggle against the center, as structures of oppressive power, to establish a new order hides a trap. In fact, if the struggle of the “periphery” against the “center” is envisaged as a takeover of power, that “resistance can become a process of replacing the center rather than deconstructing the binary structure of center and margin.⁷⁵ In this way, the process of decolonization would be, paradoxically, colonial, just as some have characterized Negritude as a racist anti-racism.⁷⁶ So, there is always a need of decolonizing every process of decolonization, a need for a decolonization of the mind. This process of decolonizing the mind is deconstruction. It is a sort of a new *modus vivendi*,⁷⁷ which is no longer dictated by the logic of oppression and exclusion, characteristic of colonization. As stated by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, one of the major names in Africa

73. In this regard, the bishop of Kinshasa made some strong statements as: “In the past, it was the foreign missionaries who conceived and thought the plans of the pastoral care and directed their execution. Today, Black Africans will conceive and think up the plans of pastoral care and will see to their execution. The roles are thus reversed.” See Malula, “L’Eglise à l’heure de l’africanité,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 54. [My translation].

74. In the perspective of the postcolonial studies, we refer to decolonization as “the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved”, both among the former colonizers and the former colonized. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 56.

75. Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 121.

76. Simon P. X. Battestini, “Deconstruction and Decolonization of the Self,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 6 (1988): 118.

77. Battestini, “Deconstruction and Decolonization of the Self,” 122–123.

when it comes to decolonization, “we have to work for a decolonized world. That means oppose hierarchy and support network.”⁷⁸ Thus, the evaluation of the decolonizing aspects of the Africanization of the clergy initiated by Cardinal Malula is a clear illustration of how any decolonization process, even outside the church, always requires a critical approach, which can be described as the decolonization of decolonization.

2. Institution and economy—the Jesuits’ Central African Province

Decolonization did not only take place via knowledge production, but also in political and economic fields. As will be argued via the case of the Society of Jesus in Congo (CAP—the [Jesuit] Central African Province), this happened very gradually for the church. The first Congolese were allowed at the newly founded novitiate of Djuma in 1948. However, it was not until 1972 that the first Congolese provincial Daniel Pasupasu took office and, accordingly, put an end to the hitherto European administration of the province. Financial dependence continued, and as late as 2000, Michel N’tangu was appointed the first African treasurer of the Province.

In order to Africanize the province, African Jesuit provincials increased the number of African consultor members to impact key decisions within the province. Also, in this perspective of the Africanization of the province, they appointed African superiors and directors in Jesuit communities and schools. They also diversified their formation by sending African Jesuits to be formed in various scientific disciplines in academic institutions in Europe, America, and Africa. Further, they took different measures of inculturation of Jesuit communities, in which western customs had taken root. They did not only introduce African food, but also adapted the way to welcome people in Jesuit communities with much more African affection, courtesy, and happiness than with distance. Even the view on poverty shifted: African Jesuits understand religious poverty not as an identification with the impoverishment of the poorest, but as the ability to stand actively by the side of the poor who suffer misery in order to shed light on the evil that it represents and to attempt to eliminate it.

In view of the fact that the study of decolonization also deals with persistent colonial patterns, we need to question the leadership’s management of the Central African Province in order to understand how it was handled. Although Africanization appeared discursively as a denunciation of colonial habits and knowledge of African/Congolese society, culture,

78. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, “Decolonizing the Mind: State of the Art,” *Présence Africaine* 197 (2018): 102.

and psyche,⁷⁹ its practical management by African provincials had been either an imitation of what Belgian Jesuit provincials did or an exclusion of European Jesuits. Being part of the Society of Jesus, an international body structure and system headed by the Jesuit curia in Rome, it was difficult for the first African Jesuit Provincial to change the system because they lacked freedom to decide within this Jesuit system. Consequently, it was a kind of likeness to his White predecessors in the management of leadership in the province. Faced once with the many dissatisfactions during a provincial congregation meeting, Pasupasu took the floor and said, “I would like you to be provincial for a week! You would then see that it is not enough to have goodwill to solve all the problems that the province is actually facing.”⁸⁰ This clearly shows that it was not easy for him to make decisions. This was due to the persistent colonial system he encountered and experienced. However, we could consider the management of the leadership in the African way as exclusive. The messages of inculturation Pasupasu’s successor Christophe Munzihirwa voiced in his writings (letters, articles, and homilies) by often using African proverbs, especially from the *Shi* (plural *Bashi*) tribe he belonged to, were interpreted by his fellow European Jesuit confreres as an exclusion of western culture.

However, with respect to the multicultural dimensions that characterize the international body of the Society of Jesus and the Ignatian spirituality that sustains the Jesuits’ spiritual life, such a particular attention discloses how decolonization can go beyond the study of the simple physical changes of people in institutional hierarchy and economic structures. Such attention confesses that the theological dimension of decolonization can be addressed by taking into account the transformative changes introduced by African Jesuit major actors. As such, this research will analyze African Jesuits’ actions on decolonization, the reactions to such decolonization demands and efforts from White superiors, as well as the tensions raised between White Jesuits and African Jesuits, and secular clergies in Congo. It will also address the positions and careers of African Jesuit priests.

To address decolonization in its historical and theological dimensions, the project’s methodology takes an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical and theological methods. Based on close analytical readings of unpublished and published written sources, the research will shed light on the Jesuit actors engaged with decolonization in the Congo’s post-colonial era. Specifically, I analyze the biographies of African Jesuits in the

79. Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night. Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 56.

80. Léon de Saint-Moulin, *Histoire des Jésuites en Afrique. Du XIe siècle à nos jours* (Namur: Editions Jésuites Lessius, 2016), 79.

unpublished dictionary of the history of the Jesuits in Central Africa; letters of Jesuit superiors and members found in the archives of the Central Africa Province in Kinshasa, Kikwit, and Kisantu; as well as letters and reports found in the archives of the North and South Belgian Jesuit Provinces, kept at KADOC, Leuven and the Jesuit Curia in Rome. These sources will inform my analysis, despite the embargo against declassification of approximately fifty years. Periodicals (e.g., *Telega*, *Revue du Clergé Africain*, *Congo-Afrique*, *Revue du Congo*) will be used to reflect upon key Jesuit agents. The reactions of White Jesuits to decolonization are gathered from reports and letters found at *Nzo Ngemba* (a Jesuit residential house) in Kikwit. Additionally, interviews and conversations were conducted with European Jesuits in Heverlee, Brussels, Namur, and Liège, and in the Congo with the elderly and young Jesuits in Kinshasa, Kikwit, and Kisantu.

In order to reconstruct and analyze the theological concepts used to describe, interpret, and orient the political shifts of decolonization in the Jesuit Order in Central Africa Province, the project is able to rely on the writings of Jesuit theologians, such as Belgian Jesuits René De Haes and Simon Decloux, Spaniard Pedro Arrupe, and Congolese Boka di Mpasi Londi and Ntima Kanza. Also, the publications of influential Jesuits from other countries, such as the Cameroonians Meinrad Hebga, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Engelbert Mveng, Jean Luc Enyegue, and Lado Ludovic, should be taken into account, just as those of Congolese secular priest theologians, such as Oscar Bimwenyi Kweshi, Bénédet Bujo, Léonard Santedi, Ignace Ndongala, Rodhain Kasuba, and Mgr. Tarcisse Tshibangu.

3. Gender—practices, rituals, and materialities of sister congregations in Kikwit

The Roman Catholic Church simultaneously 1) represents a particular epistemology; 2) forms an institutional hierarchy that is territorially anchored, and 3) informs a social life world and inspires forms of social engagement, collaboration and cohabitation. When studying the decolonization of the church, a focus on either the ways in which theologians have dealt with Catholic teachings in the wake of decolonization, or the ways in which the church hierarchy in formerly colonized territories has indigenized, only tells part of story. For example, women only become visible in a focus on the third level, because they have been historically excluded from the two other levels. The church hierarchy is (and has always been) exclusively male, and although many women successfully (have) complete(d) theological studies, historically speaking the most important and impactful theologians have been men. Nevertheless, the

church extensively runs on the efforts of women who, as part of orders and congregations, have devoted their lives to prayer or apostolic activities, such as education, health care, social work or pastoral care. It is worth exploring how Catholic sisters have engaged with notions of decolonization, discursively as well as in terms of practices, habits and congregational organization. As the work of anthropologist Joan Burke has shown, Congolese Catholic sisters have interacted with decolonizing dynamics in their own way by incorporating particular uses specific to the population of the former Kongo Kingdom into the congregational life, leading to a hybrid status quo.⁸¹

Sister orders and congregations are the framework for Catholic inspired forms of cohabitation and collective religious life. Nuns commit to a life of living, working, and praying in community, in line with particular teachings and rules. Apostolic congregations differ from contemplative orders in that they engage in activities that aim to have a direct societal impact. They either organize schooling, run health care facilities, support vulnerable groups in society through forms of social work, or engage in pastoral care for the Catholics in the parishes in which they are located. Apostolic congregations equally initiated the missionary endeavors in 19th-century Africa.

These forms of apostolate actively tie congregations to specific places. Their outward focus inevitably intertwines them with societal evolutions, forcing them to interact with public life in the areas in which they are active. In order to study decolonization processes, one should therefore analyze how these congregations in Africa/Congo engaged with and incorporated ideas of decolonization, inculturation or Africanization that were formulated by theologians and other intellectuals, or how they indigenized their ranks. Yet, another, even more valuable approach is to study how the postcolonial situation impacted (and is impacting) collective life in congregational communities, the place Catholic sisters could claim for themselves in society, and how these congregations developed from missionary institutions to multicultural, multiracial, and transnational institutes of religious life. Such a focus can lay bare how decolonization transcends the realm of discursivity and can also be embodied in particular practices, rituals, and materialities. A few examples: elements of the Zairian Rite, which incorporates Congolese cultural elements into the Catholic liturgy and was approved by the Vatican in 1988, have trickled down to the daily prayers in sister communities, where shakers and drums

81. Joan Burke, *These Catholic Sisters are all Mamas!: Towards the Inculturation of the Sisterhood in Africa, an Ethnographic Study* (Leiden: Brill Book Archive, 2001).

accompany the prayer chants. In the 1970s, under the influence of the efforts of Cardinal Malula, the archbishop of Kinshasa, to adapt the church to Congolese reality, Catholic sisters changed their dress from a Western modest outfit to colorful *pagnes*. On the walls of the living rooms of sister communities in Congo, pictures of the Pope and important missionaries of the congregation hang side by side to those of local Congolese saints and bishops, creating racially and culturally hybrid spaces through decoration.

Mick Feyaerts' doctoral project explores how the community of Catholic sisters in Kikwit (Kwilu province) has evolved with and adapted to post-colonial society (1960-2000). It approaches this community as a network informed by different degrees of Catholicly inspired cohabitation and collaboration that, throughout the second half of the 20th century, has transcended racial, congregational and apostolical boundaries. In Kikwit, an old colonial and missionary bastion with a Catholic population of 60%, nuns form(ed) a visible and respected group in urban society that was (and still is) located at the forefront of some political challenges (e.g. the Mulelist Uprising of 1963-1964, or Mobutu's anti-clerical policies in the context of his Authentication Politics), and was equally well-equipped to tackle others (e.g. the 1995 Ebola outbreak in the city center).

Her project combines historical and anthropological methods. Many sister communities in Africa/Congo were founded by missionary sisters and are part of transnational congregations that originate in Europe or North America. Hence, the archives of the motherhouses of such congregations in Europe hold valuable information to write a history of sister congregations in Congo. These archives however have multiple limitations. First of all, the gradual withdrawal of European sisters from Africa from the 1980s onwards increased the autonomy of the communities in Africa, so fewer documents were sent to Europe (not in the least because African cultures are less focused on written documents than in Europe). Moreover, the archives that do exist were created mostly from the perspective of the European sisters, so they fail to convey the voice of African sisters. Today, a great number of Congolese sisters from the first few generations is still alive, so oral history can serve not just to fill in the gaps of the archival material, but also to capture and represent the voices of the Congolese sisters.

For a project that focuses on forms of cohabitation and collaboration in a cross-cultural context, anthropological methods can be a great inspiration and a valuable addition to the historiographical methodology. First of all, an anthropological approach to oral history creates the space for attention to the differences in the operation of memory and narrative

construction across cultures. Secondly, participant observation, anthropology's main method, allows the researcher to gather information outside of formal interviews that will allow them to dig deeper. Amicable relationships with key interlocutors can lead to instances, such as dinner table conversations or walks through the parish that provide very different insights from those present in archival material or oral histories. Walks through the parish for example illuminate the physical implantation of the church and sister congregations in a particular area, and the ways in which particular sisters engage with this territoriality. Tours through convent buildings or community sites reveal the materiality of collective religious life, and expose the hybridity of these places as they carefully interweave their connections to Europe and Africa in architectural styles, placement of furniture, decoration of the rooms, etc. Similarly, an ethnographic presence during rituals, such as masses or prayers, shifts the attention to the physical and audiovisual dimensions of religious life, and how it came to integrate African elements in the Greco-Latin tradition.

Such an approach destabilizes an understanding of religion as a discursive negotiation of a particular epistemology. Rather, it unveils the material dimensions of religion by centralizing how it manifests itself physically in the world, through for example religious buildings, liturgical objects, dress, body movement, etc., and shapes social life for a great deal of actors.

Simultaneously it partially bridges the gap between the church hierarchy and the lay Catholic masses by shifting the focus away from levels in which only ordained men are present (1 and 2). With this focus, Catholic sisters resurface as an in-between category. As not-ordained members of the institutionalized church, they foster deep connections to their diocese or the Vatican on the one hand, and to lay people on the other hand, on much more equal terms than ordained priests for example. As mediators between God and believers (through masses, the communion, confessions, and other sacraments), the latter have a very different relation to the lay masses than nuns.

Conclusion

This chapter presents research projects on the decolonization of the Roman Catholic Church in Congo and argues that this can only be done in a multidisciplinary and multifaceted way. Following Anibal Quijano's colonial matrix of power, it works with different cases, each covering several of the domains that the colonial power attempted to control and working with different methodologies.

The first project, which is mainly theological in its aims and methods, examines the decolonizing efforts of Joseph Cardinal Malula, the first Congolese archbishop of Kinshasa, who aimed to adapt both the Christian message and Catholic institutions to Congolese culture. The second project is mainly historical and approaches the shifts in organization, leadership and hierarchy within the Central African Jesuit Province in the 20th century through a decolonial lens. It explores the ways and levels of Africanization, and questions to what extent these initiatives had decolonizing results. Female religious resurface in the third project, which explores how sister congregations in Kikwit have interacted with post-colonial evolutions. By combining historical and anthropological methods, this project aims to unveil the less-explicit, non-discursive and more material ways of engaging with decolonization.

Although all three projects are very promising in terms of cases, theoretical focus, and methods, they do come with challenges. It for example is debatable whether a decolonization lens can be applied to the third project at all. One might wonder if evolutions and developments can be labeled as decolonization when there was no explicit engagement with it. Does decolonization imply intentionality? If it does, reading such an approach to church history through a lens of decolonization might be imposing something that does not honestly reflect that history's dynamics. The anthropological method moreover holds ethical challenges that should carefully be negotiated. Working with testimonies of living people and observing the interracial and intergenerational relationships between sisters might unveil particular tensions within and between congregations, which might lead to disorder and distrust (also towards the researcher). Undertaken by a Congolese Jesuit, the second project holds similar risks. A focus on decolonization within the Jesuit Order might be interpreted by Belgian confrères as an attack on their work, which could widen the gap between Belgian and Congolese Jesuits. Lastly, all three projects run the risk of reducing life in Congo (or Africa for that matter) to "a post-colonial condition." This more than ever necessitates a critical approach to one's own work, and a constant and active reflection on the very meaning of (de)colonization.

Nevertheless, we think that this research may significantly contribute to ongoing and new debates. Until the publications of Elizabeth A. Foster (2019), Vincent Viaene, Bram Cleys, and Jan De Maeyer (2020), Idesbald Goddeeris (2021), and Jean Luc Enyegue (2023), the topic of decolonization in the religious setting did not attract much scholarly attention. Besides, for a long time, much attention to religion debates was synonymous with "mission history." Works by Jesuits and non-Jesuit scholars put much

emphasis on missionaries' undertakings but less on the role played by African converts. Viaene et al. include among the African converts, auxiliaries of missionaries, the contingent of African abbés, slaves, women, and young men. All these converts appropriated Christianity as literate subjects, navigated the colonial order, and improved their rights within it.⁸² This chapter takes seriously into account the role played by African actors.

82. Vincent Viaene et al., *Religion Colonization Decolonization in the Congo, 1885–1960* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 10.

CHAPTER 12

MIMICRY-DECOLONIALITY: THE PERFORMATIVE SELF-CONTRADICTION IN DECOLONIZING THEOLOGIES

Rica Ancheta, Maike Domsel, Judith Gruber, Christian Kern,
Sigrid Rettenbacher

This chapter is the result of a collaborative writing project of theologians from the Philippines, Austria, and Germany. By engaging in this shared reflection, we sought to respond to a troubling insight that emerged from encounters, conversations, and conflicts at the conference “De/colonizing Theologies. Glocal Histories, Contemporary Challenges”¹: The conference was programmed to offer intellectual space to explore the trajectories for decolonizing theology, and yet, as an academic encounter, it was thoroughly shaped by the legacies of colonial practices that have been forged in a complex historical nexus of academia, church, and empire, and continue to condition the material and intellectual possibilities of knowing today. Jasmine Gani and Jenna Marshall articulate these entanglements and their ongoing impact on mechanisms of knowledge production succinctly when they argue that

academia has had a long history of supplying imperial policy through its knowledge production, [yet] the reverse has also been true – it is not a uni-directional process ... imperial policies and those that embed racial injustices have often provided the starting-point for academic enquiry, with imperialist and racist constructions taken as the material reality from which to launch any research, without historicization or interrogation of whether that is how it has to be.²

Recognizing how profoundly these legacies shaped our conference encounters, we were thus left with unsettling questions: (In which ways) do unseen, unacknowledged mechanisms of race and imperialism continue to shape the emerging field of decolonial theology? How do we address

1. Cf. the conference program: <https://www.insecttheology.org/conferences>.

2. Jasmine K. Gani and Jenna Marshall, “The impact of colonialism on policy and knowledge production in International Relations,” *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January 2022): 5–22.

the fact that it continues to uphold colonial tropes and risks reifying colonial and racial injustices? In a nutshell: *Is there a performative self-contradiction at work in our efforts at decolonizing theology?* For us, the urgent need arose to scrutinize in which ways our attempts at decolonization do not actually disrupt but perpetuate colonial legacies in academic knowledge productions—legacies that delineate the parameters of rational and acceptable debate, determine who can and cannot be included in the field as experts (whether scholars or practitioners), and condition the ways we select topics for scholarly investigations, define research questions and validate appropriate sources and methods.

In this article, we will tackle this problem in four steps. First, we aim to pinpoint dimensions of this performative self-contradiction as it gives shape to the concrete sites in which we work and theologize: The unsettling discovery at the conference has served for us as a lens to uncover the persistence of colonial patterns and performative self-contradictions in theological practices that aim for transformation in a wider range of settings that we will describe in a set of selected cases such that they may point to larger patterns shaping theological knowledge production in academic and ecclesial institutions today. Methodologically, we will proceed autoethnographically in this section, i.e. we will use our own experiences in order to “describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences”³, with the goal of interrogating how personal experiences are shaped by, intersect with, and concretely embody political configurations in a particular context.

In a second step, we will reconstruct some structures and mechanisms that can be found across our examples and contexts, which represent hidden colonial patterns: the reproduction of center and periphery, of superordination and subordination, of fading in and out of realities and experiences. Along with these patterns, we work out a *peculiar inconsistency in academic work and theology*, especially where it is explicitly critical and intends to pursue decolonial goals. It can be shown that a performative contradiction occurs within such critical-decolonial work: Power relations are named and criticized, but at the same time colonial power relations are reproduced in this critical work—under the surface and behind the mask of critique. Where criticism of colonial patterns takes place, they are simultaneously reproduced and sometimes even reinforced. We call this performative contradiction “*mimicry-decoloniality*.”

3. Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, “Doing Autoethnography,” in *Autoethnography. Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 46–67.

Section 3 reflects on this “mimicry-decoloniality” through a theological lens and identifies three theological thought patterns that condition and enable it. In specific soteriological, ecclesiological, and incarnational theological perspectives, the “other” is superficially present and accepted in the decolonial discourse, but its authority and power to change is thwarted behind the scenes. There is an “autoimmunization” of decolonial theological thinking towards the “other,” which it recognizes, but whose transformative, even unsettling effectiveness it simultaneously suppresses.

Finally, in the fourth step, our text leads into an ambivalent intermediate space that emerges from the previous observation that the decolonization of theology is necessary, but, at the same time, possibly impossible. Theological thinking remains entangled in the structures that condition it, and the step towards a hopeful, utopian dissolution of one’s own coloniality can possibly already be a reproduction of a secret supremacy in the shape of mimicry-decolonial. Nevertheless, one cannot abandon this work in the tense space of de/colonization. In our text, we therefore conclude by presenting some guiding questions that can orient the critical work of de/colonial theology in this impure in-between space of theological academic work.

1. Autoethnographic vignettes: Entanglements in colonial mechanisms

1.1 *Judith—Leuven*⁴: A colonial exitus-reditus scheme

Since 2017, I have been working as a professor at the “Research Unit Systematic Theology and Religious Studies” at the Faculty of Theology of the KU Leuven, covering the focus “Intercultural and Postcolonial Theologies.” As part of this position, I am also the coordinator of the “Centre for Liberation Theologies.” This professorship was newly established with internal university funds; it does not continue an already established focus, but was created specifically to establish this research direction at the Faculty of Theology. The faculty decided on this focus in view of its long tradition of international cooperation, which it has cultivated since its founding in 1432 and deepened in 1969 with the establishment of a full theology degree program in English. Today, nearly 500 students from all five continents are enrolled in the faculty’s international study programs.

This tradition, it has become increasingly clear, calls for an explicit theological engagement with issues of interculturality and postcoloniality.

4. Cf. Judith Gruber, “Decolonizing Theology? Schlaglichter auf Lehre und Forschung einer post/kolonialen Theologie,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 107, no. 1–2 (2023): 13–19.

On the one hand, the presence of international students makes it possible to experience the cultural diversity of the universal church in a particular place and enables the global circulation of theological knowledge production. It was not least this lived interculturality that motivated the founding of the “Centre for Liberation Theologies” in 1989, which sees itself as a platform for exchange between “First World” and “Two-Thirds World” theologies and, in the tradition of liberation theology, focuses particularly on the interdisciplinary analysis of relations of oppression as a constitutive building block of theological work. On the other hand, theological teaching and research in this intercultural setting are also shaped by the power imbalances that inevitably characterize every academic environment as a “normative order that adheres to certain rules of self-justification”⁵, and thus challenges us to subject academic knowledge production to a critical power analysis. Power relations inscribe themselves into the irreducibly asymmetrical interactions between teachers and students, they give shape to research and teaching programs in interaction with social and political discourses “outside” the university, and in the field of theology, they are also impacted by ecclesial power constellations.

At the intersection of these dimensions, the interculturality of theological work in Leuven has typically been disciplined by a colonial “exitus-reditus” (exit-return) scheme. Beyond the Flemish context, this pattern can be identified as the dominant paradigm for framing cultural differences in ecclesial and theological discourses. Samuel Y. Pang succinctly describes this pattern in his critique of “the study of world Christianity” as a colonial project in which “[m]aterials and thoughts from non-Western countries are collected, analyzed, compared, competed with and classified in such a way that Western subjects can occupy the central role in representing their theologies.”⁶ Hence, rather than unsettling the interpretive sovereignty of Western culture and church through an encounter with “other” Christianities of Western culture and church, it further cements it. In this way, a colonial center-periphery logic is perpetuated in contemporary theological discourses on cultural plurality that enables hegemonic forms of Christian identity to tacitly establish themselves as a seemingly self-evident interpretive principle of intraecclesial diversity. At the Faculty of Theology in Leuven (as at other North Atlantic universities), this logic

5. Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad, Maik Fielitz, Johanna Leinius, Gianna Magdalena Schlichte, “Introduction: Critical Interventions in Knowledge Production from Within and Without Academia,” in *Knowledge, Normativity and Power in Academia*, Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad et al. eds., vol. 24, (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2018), 7–28.

6. Samuel Y. Pang, “A Postcolonial Theological Project: Creating Space for the Studies of World Christianity,” *International Review of Mission* 97 (2008): 78–90.

is exemplified by a common research design for doctoral projects in which non-European doctoral students work on contextual theology for their home country by bringing a socio-cultural and/or theological analysis of “their” context into conversation with the work of a prominent European (male) theologian in order to make it fruitful for theological construction. This research design points us to the efficacy of a theological discourse that grants European traditions of Christianity interpretive sovereignty over “new” forms of Christian identity and attributes scholarly authority to White men. This epistemic privileging is also reflected in the staffing of teaching and research personnel at the Leuven Faculty (and not only here), which does not reflect the cultural and ethnic (and, to a certain extent, gender) diversity of the student body.

In short, what we can see from the habits of theological knowledge production at Leuven is that a turn to other(ed) Christianities does not necessarily disrupt, but is prone to reinscribing the colonial patterns at work in a global church. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, there are currently methodological reorientations under way in interdisciplinary mission studies that critically interrogate the colonial legacies of today’s theological practices. The dominant *theological* imaginaries which orient the field, however, continue to be informed by the totalitarian logic of empire.⁷

1.2 *Maike—Bonn: Underappreciation and devaluation of “external” expertise*

In 2019, I completed my doctoral studies in Systematic Theology with a dissertation titled “Living until the End! A Freedom-Theoretical Foundation of Christian End-of-Life Care.”⁸ This work focused on the emancipatory and liberating potential of the Christian ethos, drawing upon Thomas Pröpper’s freedom-theoretical approach and the Christian hope of resurrection. Following this, I embarked on a postdoctoral project in the field of Religious Education, which centered on the spiritual and religious self-conception of religious educators. Throughout my research journey, the theme of freedom has remained integral and continues to permeate my work.⁹

7. Judith Gruber, “Letting all voices speak? Politics of Representation in Intercultural Theology,” in *T&T Handbook of Intercultural Theology and Mission* (London: Bloomsburg T&T Clark, 2025), forthcoming.

8. Maike Maria Domsel, *Leben bis zuletzt. Eine freiheitstheoretische Fundierung christlicher Sterbebegleitung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019).

9. Maike Maria Domsel, *Hinter dem Horizont. Zum spirituall-religiösen Selbstverständnis von Religionslehrkräften* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2023).

What sets my professional situation apart is that both my doctoral dissertation and my habilitation, as well as all my subsequent research projects, were completed alongside my role as a high school teacher. This has allowed me to be part of two educational systems that, while sharing certain common structures such as a hierarchical framework, are surprisingly incompatible in some respects.

In my professional journey, straddling the realms of high school teaching and university lecturing, I find myself immersed in a complex web of challenges and contradictions. As I engage with the issue of postcolonial structures within education, I am not only confronted with the need to dismantle these structures but also the underappreciation of teachers' expertise within the university context.

My experiences have made me acutely aware of the far-reaching impact of restrictive and postcolonial structures within educational institutions. These structures encompass various aspects such as racial biases, gender disparities, social backgrounds, and more. In response, I actively engage in projects that aim to dismantle these systems and promote inclusivity and equity. Whether it involves decolonizing curricula or amplifying marginalized voices, I am dedicated to challenging the power imbalances that perpetuate discrimination and oppression.

However, it is essential to recognize that the expertise of teachers often goes unrecognized or undervalued within the university setting. Unrealistic expectations and misconceptions about the realities of teaching persist, even in teacher training contexts. The complex dynamics of classrooms, the daily challenges faced by teachers, and the nuanced understanding required to effectively engage diverse student populations can sometimes be overlooked in favor of abstract theoretical frameworks.

This disparity between the university and school settings poses a significant challenge in addressing postcolonial legacies effectively. It demands a critical examination of the assumptions and preconceptions that may hinder a genuine understanding of the educational landscape. As an educator deeply invested in both spheres, I am committed to bridging this divide and fostering a dialogue that acknowledges the expertise of teachers in shaping inclusive and transformative learning environments.

By integrating the practical insights gained from my experiences as a high school teacher into my university lectures and research, I seek to bring to light the realities and complexities of educational contexts. This includes challenging prevailing narratives, broadening perspectives, and advocating for more inclusive pedagogical approaches. It is through this intersectional lens that I strive to empower future educators with a comprehensive understanding of the postcolonial challenges they will face in their teaching careers.

In conclusion, my dual role as a high school teacher and university lecturer provides me with a unique perspective on the intricate interplay between postcolonial structures and educational practices. While actively engaging in efforts to dismantle these structures, I also recognize the need to address the undervaluing of teachers' expertise within the university context. By bridging the divide, elevating the voices of teachers, and fostering dialogue, I aim to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape that empowers both educators and students.

1.3 *Sigrid—Austria: Blinding out of privileges*

When developing a new course program on intercultural theology for the University of Portland Study Abroad Program, I noticed an institutional awareness concerning post-colonial questions that I had never encountered in the German-speaking context: Professors and university lecturers are actively asked to decolonize the syllabus:

We understand decolonization as the identification, interrogation, and dismantling of power structures that carry legacies of racism, imperialism, and colonialism in the production of knowledge. By decolonizing our syllabi, we make a conscious effort to change the way we understand how and where knowledge is produced. Our program contests the assumption that white, western intellectual traditions are superior, or yet universal.¹⁰

The university policy not only aims at integrating diverse voices into research and teaching but at paying attention to the underlying power imbalances in the production of knowledge that structures our way of perceiving the world. I have never come across such an awareness of decolonization and its complexity with epistemology and actions on an institutional level—be it academic or ecclesial—in the German-speaking world. Though there is a certain curiosity about the theological potential of postcolonial studies—which one can infer from invitations to speak about this topic at theological conferences—there remains a certain ambivalence: Postcolonial theologies find themselves in the tension of giving rise to both fascination and the fear of putting too much into question. Thus, they do not only reflect on processes of marginalization but are themselves a perspective of the margins in the established university system.

10. University of Portland, Gender & Women's studies, "Decolonize your Syllabus," accessed 22 April, 2025, <https://college.up.edu/gwsm/decolonize-your-syllabus.html#:~:text=We%20understand%20decolonization%20as%20the%20identification%2C%20interrogation%2C%20and,we%20understand%20how%20and%20where%20knowledge%20is%20produced.>

This can also be seen in institutional embeddedness. Most of the theologians I have encountered in my Austrian setting who are working in postcolonial studies came across this approach at the time of their academic qualification—be it dissertation or habilitation. Of course, there may be instances where this perspective from the margins gains a certain validity or influence—as has been the case in the context of the Theological Faculty of Salzburg. This is reflected in our writing group; it is no coincidence that three of our group members have a Salzburg background. They independently worked with postcolonial perspectives in their PhD theses, and it is no coincidence that a certain postcolonial awareness has been established at the Department for Systematic Theology and the Centre for Intercultural Theology in Salzburg which can be discerned in the following generations of PhD students adopting this perspective as well. However, when changing to another university setting after three or four years (which is a necessity for young researchers in the present time), one starts on the margins anew: One perceives theological knowledge production through a lens that does not (yet) correspond to mainstream theology. Yet, one cannot reduce a postcolonial perspective to a certain area of theology. When theology is done from a postcolonial or decolonial stance the formal object influences the material object as well so that the whole enterprise of theology as such changes in a relevant manner.

Sara Ahmed reminds us that “whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it.”¹¹ For those “outside” the privilege of whiteness it can be seen, felt, and experienced everywhere. It is inscribed in their bodies. Declarations of anti-racism in institutional settings paradoxically remain on the level of non-performativity as Ahmed points out. In the context of the German-speaking system of the Catholic Church and academic theology, which is in many relevant ways connected to it, there are a lot of blind spots in the sense of privileges that are not perceived and reflected upon. One can assume that, parallel to what Ahmed says about race, the privileges of the male ordained leaders of the church are invisible to themselves but can only be felt by those outside this privileged position be it by way of sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Similarly, the un-scrutinized patriarchal heteronormative order on which church teaching rests is only a safe harbor for those who inhabit it, not for those who do not belong. And of course, the theological system in the German-speaking world is not only White but eurocentric as well based on many forms of othering of persons and knowledge that culturally or religiously do not belong to the eurocentric, Christian thought system. Seen from the perspective of

11. Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness,” in *Borderlands* 3 (2004): 1.

intersectionality, there are different layers on which privileged power positions can(not) be seen but felt clearly by those excluded within theology and even more so the Catholic Church. If theology and the Christian faith are about salvation, liberation, and the fullness of life then a performative self-contradiction can be spotted in this not being aware of and blinding out of privileges and exclusions. A point in case is the methodological approach of seeing/judging/acting from catholic social ethics. It is used to perceive the challenges of the time and to act in an appropriate manner from the perspective of the Christian faith. However, the attempt to decolonize theology makes clear what this method cannot decipher. If we are not aware of how our theological knowledge is produced and what kind of privileges/discriminations are inscribed in this knowledge production then the seeing, judging and acting will not live up to what it promises. In other words, a decolonial perspective in theology can make obvious on what excluded knowledge our allegedly universal theological knowledge is based on.

1.4 *Christian—Dresden/Münster: Construction of immaturity and intellectual dispossession in the name of competence*

I have been working as a research assistant at theological institutes since 2020. My responsibilities include university teaching and each semester I conduct one to two courses with student groups/learning groups of 5 to 15 participants, in the form of seminars or lectures.

In the process of designing a course, I repeatedly encounter a dynamic or pattern that I would like to call the colonial pattern of the academic enterprise: The implicit construction of immaturity that goes hand in hand with intellectual dispossession. When I design a course, I establish—or am supposed to establish—certain parameters according to didactic norms: subject areas, questions, teaching and learning objectives. I construct a subject area of teaching and learning and decide on ways in which the learning area is explored, and how learning goals are best achieved. This is also the case when a learning process is designed to be completely open. In this case, then, the decision for this openness also goes back to me as a lecturer.

The construction process of the learning objective and learning paths has a peculiar performative effect. It not only establishes a subject area, but also constructs—at least to some extent—the group of learners in a specific way. First, the learners are placed at a distance from the subject matter. If a learning process is to take place, then it is implicitly presupposed that there is a non-knowledge of the subject matter on the part of

the learners. They stand, at least partially, in a distance to the learning object; under a kind of “veil of not-knowing/ignorance.” At the same time, a meaning is attributed to the object of learning; it is somehow marked as important, as something to be learned. If the reasons for this object of learning are not made explicit, then an implicit kind of mysteriousness is superimposed over it: “There is something important, it is important that you get to know it and step out of the veil of not-knowing/ignorance!”

The learning/teaching process takes place in this fundamental difference between meaningful knowledge on the one hand and ignorance to be overcome on the other. It is accompanied by the construction of maturity on the part of the teachers and the construction of (at least partial) immaturity on the part of the learners.¹² The decision about the significance of the learning object, including the decision to justify and disclose its significance, lies mostly on the side of the lecturer and the structures in which his/her work takes place. The learning imperative “You should know this, it is significant!” comes from the lecturer. In contrast, in the performance of the learning enterprise, the group of learners emerges as recipients of specific knowledge and ways of learning. In this subjectification/objectification, I see a kind of intellectual dispossession at work, which consists in the constructed distance from the object of learning and the attribution of “mastery”/“allegiance” regarding the competence to be acquired. As a teacher, I am also not in a sovereign position, since the construction process is affected by a variety of regulative mechanisms in which this game of maturity/disempowerment and intellectual dispossession is also at stake.

The first regulative mechanism is that the construction process is regulated by *a priori* established content-related structuring of the field; for example, in the form of modules of the courses of study. These in turn are coupled (in the course of the Bologna process in the European higher education system) with specific professional fields. From these fields, in which students may later work and earn their living, requirements arise that are implicitly inscribed in the learning process as norms. The learning process is also structured in terms of content by subject traditions which presuppose/require that certain subjects access such content and methodological approaches. This is relevant in theology, for example, with regard to the *loci theologici* and the classic *tractatus* of the subjects of dogmatics. The *depositum fidei* is translated and structured in a *lingua theologica*. Secondly, the learning process is regulated by specific forms of

12. Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The ignorant Schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

learning, knowledge production, and knowledge presentation, which are considered recognizable and assessable in the university context (oral presentation, papers etc.). Further, an implicit attribution of meaning is connected with the objects of knowledge and forms of knowledge, the reasons for which, however, usually become unclear in the darkness of their origin: “You should know this!” (...but why actually?). Finally, university administrative techniques also play into the construction process of teaching/learning: the allocation of space, the equipment and architectonics of learning spaces, the financing of learning formats and media.

In order to teach, I am required to operate within these mechanisms and to reproduce them, at least to a certain extent, because only in them can the teaching/learning process take place and become recognizable in the system. As a lecturer, I perceive myself here in the position of a recipient who is required to obey a system of means and mechanisms. In this, I, too, am put at a distance from the objects of learning and become a figure who, at best, rather passively receives and applies these mechanisms. It is prescriptions, normative constraints, regimes of forms that determine the recognizability of my work. Here, too, a construction of maturity/disempowerment is at work, which is linked to a form of intellectual dis-possession and leads to losses of creativity.

In this sense, a complex process of intellectual appropriation and dis-possession takes place in the construction process of a course. In other words, “colonization of thought worlds” (*Kolonialisierung von Gedankenwelten*) takes place in the academic system. While learning processes are under a sign of professional maturity, they in fact remain bound to a paradigm of permanent immaturity.

1.5 *Rica—Manila: Uncovering the fields of power*

I started my teaching career in two universities and a college in 2004. First, as part-time faculty in three universities in Manila; second, as probationary faculty at De La Salle University; and later, as tenured faculty at San Beda College Alabang in 2015. I became the Chairperson of the Religious and Theology Department and was appointed the Head of the Religious Education Department in 2019 up until 2021.

The theology department has long been managed by male leaders. Inarguably, most theology departments are male-dominated, in which teaching theology is highly cerebral and academic. In this context, work processes are systematic and efficient, and we learn to collaborate on myriad tasks professionally. While we do recognize diversity, the theology department has always lauded male achievements. At De La Salle University, my

propensity to write research articles was kindled by the desire to be made permanent. I did several research articles hoping to meet the requirements for an assistant professorship and obtain tenureship. I spearheaded the national conference and was tasked among other things, to organize an international conference. My role, however, out of deference to a senior male faculty, was to be called, “Assistant Conference Organizer,” not “Lead Organizer.” Nevertheless, I did my work in the background and ensured everything would run smoothly. It was a successful team endeavor, and the conference was a success. When I moved to SBCA, I also initiated the first national conference. All went well and, being the Chairperson, I ensured things would go as planned. It was a huge success.

The society in which we live is inclined to listen to a male voice. Philippine society is still overtly patriarchal. Females are deemed weak and emotional and can serve as second fiddle. On several occasions, women faculty were tasked to do the follow-through in school activities and the males were the “go-to” administrators for big decisions. Although it took a drastic change when I was appointed the head of the department, female leadership had to be soft, considerate, and obedient. I did manage to earn people’s respect, especially in my department. But, female leaders vis-à-vis male leaders are often “directed” to do their work quietly to avoid conflicts.

In retrospect, being the first female leader of the department launched my career. It made me see my mission as middle-aged faculty. It was fulfilling but there was a quiet struggle to assert my leadership, which found its way through my research articles that revolved around critiques against the structures of domination and misogyny. My research led me back to the waves of feminism.

Feminist ideas were ripe in the Philippines in the 80s,¹³ and gradually impacted the perception and role of women in the 90s. Fast forward to 2023, women occupying positions of leadership have only reached 32–42%. According to Grant Thornton’s annual Women Business Report,¹⁴ female leadership had reached 48% in 2020 and now holds 32% of top leadership positions, up from 31% in 2021. Numbers reveal that women leaders have increased by 1% but it also reveals uneasiness with even the prospect of having a female leading the country in 2022. One such case was Vice President Leni Robredo’s bid for the Presidency. Needless to say, the election results were a symptom of a long-standing bias against women.

13. Mylene D. Hega, Veronica C. Alporha and Meggan S. Evangelista, *Feminism and the Women’s Movement in the Philippines: Struggles, Advances, and Challenges* (2017), accessed April 23, 2024, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/14072.pdf>.

14. “Women in Business Report,” *P&A Grant Thornton*, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.grantthornton.com.ph/news-centre/women-in-business-report/>.

Jokery is typical of Filipinos. For example, former President Duterte¹⁵ often joked about her or other people rather than tackling relevant issues. Often lines are blurred between tirades and jokery. Jokes have hidden meanings to quell tension, disapproval, boredom, or criticism. As a leader who navigated the gradual transition to the new normal, I listened to both serious conversations and the messages implied through jokes. Admittedly, the habit of throwing jokes or undermining an initiative is played out for a while, in small circles. There were occasions when females felt clueless about the sorts of jokes that took the attention away from the agenda. At other times, they just laughed it off. Jokery is a field of power in a male-dominated department. In my case, my way of coping would be through efficient work or initiatives to contribute to the knowledge base and keep my colleagues busy. As a female leader, my work entailed clear communication, efficiency, and the courage to step up. I buried myself in my work to surpass expectations and manage resistance to keep the department united and focused on our goals. So, the colonizing patterns embedded in male domination, superiority, and the inability to accept a female leader gave birth to new ideas for a gradual reform in the department. Reforms like organizing systematically our workloads, taking minutes in meetings, distributing tasks, and empowering male and female collaborators were some of my contributions. However, change is always met with resistance. These external expressions of resistance revealed an internal struggle to accept female leadership. As a leader, I had to be keen to keep the team united. Thus, I felt relieved when my term of office was over and I moved to a quieter space at the Office of the Registrar.

Patterns are vast fields of power. They reveal subcultures and cement beliefs. Pierre Bourdieu expounded upon fields of power at the Collège de France in 1985-1986 and in *The State of Nobility* as he argued that “a field of power struggles among the holders of different forms of power” is capable of being exercised in different fields.¹⁶ As he explained the genesis and structures of the fields, I found resonance in what he wanted to convey: People operate according to our constructs of reality, carrying the weight of fields of power. These constructs define our social relations and create patterns that become fields of power. But power either clashes with

15. Pia Ranada, “Duterte: Joke about Robredo ‘necessary to make people laugh,’” Rappler, Nov 9, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/151808-duterte-leni-robredo-skirt-lightenment/>.

16. Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992*, ed. Patrick Champagne, Remi Lenoir, Franck Poupeau and Marie-Christine Riviere, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014); Pierre Bourdieu, *The State of Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, trans. Laretta C. Clough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 264.

fields of power or struggles to cohere. Leadership mirrors power struggle, and the dominant power tends to become a colonizer. Perhaps, at some point, I could have also asserted my role too much, and in other instances, I might have been the colonized. Nevertheless, my experiences have taught me valuable lessons. One of which is endurance as I keep my gaze on the goal. Paul wrote, “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14).

Colonial patterns are real, and they are not easy to dismantle. To do that requires speaking to power and denouncing untruths, which have become fields of power. Hence, academic communities must foster a culture that infuses values that can transform fields of power into authentic spaces of caring.

2. Specifying the problem: Autoimmunization, “as-if”-presence of the other, and mimicry-decoloniality

The preceding autoethnographic vignettes describe from various contexts in academic work how asymmetries are (re)produced, how expertise and experience from “outside” are concealed and how valorizations and devaluations, inclusions and exclusions of persons involved take place. Although our descriptions come from different contexts and deal with different perspectives, common patterns of a colonial nature can be identified in them, which run through all of our examples. In and through these patterns, a performative contradiction becomes visible in the fields described: Although criticism of power relations is regularly practiced there, including criticism of one’s own colonial patterns, the fields are, at the same time, characterized by a peculiar attitude and mechanism that prevents this criticism to become effective and to counter colonial patterns in a transformative way. There is a peculiar autoimmunization dynamic in the respective fields that we touch on in the examples.

A first example for the transversal colonial patterns running through the different contexts is the *(re)construction of center and periphery*. In the academic system there are centers that offer theological education and produce theological knowledge—like the ones mentioned in the vignettes: Leuven, Bonn, Innsbruck, Fribourg, Manila, and Salzburg. Some of these centers attract students from other parts of the globe, develop charisma and attractiveness. Students of theology bring with them their own different experiences, languages and imaginaries, and articulate them in the contexts of theological learning and research processes. At the same time, however, as Judith’s reconstruction shows, these experiences and topics are processed and made relevant in such a way that they submit to or fit

into an already existing, central system of interpretation and reference of Western-European character. The appropriation of these patterns by those coming from outside is fundamental for the approval of their academic work. It is only in this that academic results and outreach become recognizable and can be capitalized by their producers.

This colonial mechanism is connected to a second pattern, the *construction and perpetuation of superiority and subordination*. Asymmetries exist not only at the discursive level, in terms of topics and hermeneutics that are considered relevant and acceptable in different ways. Super-/subordinations are also systematically reproduced in relation to the actors who appear in the system. Christian's case description above shows how the learning/teaching process is constituted by the construction of a fundamental difference that assigns meaning to objects of knowledge, and grids individuals who either possess what is considered significant knowledge or find themselves in a deficient situation of ignorance. Rica's example extends the problem of the systemic (re)construction of superiority/subordination in a gender perspective. In academic systems in the Philippines characterized by male dominance, women as speakers, female voices, and female leadership styles are marginalized or booted out by means of ironic jokes that have an invective undertone.

The (re)construction of center and periphery as well as of superiority/subordination sometimes condenses into the *demarcation of an inside from an outside*—a third transversal colonial pattern in our examples. Areas are identified that are only to a lesser extent or not at all relevant to the work of the center. For the sake of its performance and clarity, they are kept at a distance. Maïke describes such a tendency for religious education research and teaching in the university context in relation to the realities of students and teachers in the high school context. Furthermore, throughout our other examples, a selection of forms becomes visible: Specific forms of interaction, presentation, and articulation are established within academic structures. They form a repertoire of acceptable forms of theological-academic work which is demarcated from a pool of other forms that are not considered acceptable for the established work in the system.

The (re)construction of center and periphery, the reinstatement of asymmetries, the demarcation of an inside from an outside pervade the cases described above as colonial patterns. This is also the case—paradoxically—where “decolonial” thinking becomes a topic itself, including “decolonizing” theologies. The critical thematization of colonial realities does not automatically affect a real suspension or transcendence of the “colonial impregnation” and imprinting of the respective patterns. Instead,

decolonizing theology itself can unfold a tendency to reestablish and perpetuate patterns that it aims to overcome theoretically.

Sigrid describes exemplarily a peculiar “non-performativity” of approaches critical of coloniality with regard to German-language theological contexts. There, even in the not very numerous cases where postcolonial approaches are implemented, researched and taught in curricula, the thematic presence does not mean that existing colonial patterns in the system are actually transcended and discarded. A gap between saying and doing in critical/postcolonial theories exists. Ahmed pushes this further by saying that the “saying” is not just a not-doing, but actively serves to reestablish White supremacy (to “say” that “we” engage in anti-racism is a whitewashing of institutions, it produces an innocence that can be identified as the core of supremacy).¹⁷ The performative contradiction is connected to this paradoxical non-effectiveness: Critical knowledge is addressed thematically, at the level of content, but does not develop effectiveness in pragmatic terms, in relation to the routines of action and structures in which “decolonial” theological discourse takes place. And even more: It can even cause colonial patterns to be re-established, reinforced and subtly reinstated behind the mask of criticism or apology.

In the contexts described, we can identify a basic problem associated with their coloniality: the autoimmunization of knowledge systems. In the examples we have traced in the autoethnographic vignettes, it is not only colonial distinctions that are reproduced, between center and periphery, between top and bottom, between inside and outside. A kind of *autoimmunization* of the knowledge system towards the “other” takes place. A peculiar relationship is established from the system to its other: The “outside,” the foreign and strange, can become present, but at the same time its repercussion on the system is thwarted or avoided. The other, the foreign, the external, the wounded and oppressed may and can be articulated in the system (in one of the examples above, the issues of students from non-European parts of the world are represented, can be incorporated into doctoral projects etc.). However, at the same time, this representation takes place in a way—in a mode—that prevents or prohibits the underlying frames and interpretive logics from being touched and changed by it.

The relationship of the system to the “other” is not an “othering” as it is more often diagnosed in postcolonial approaches—not a simple demarcation of a system from an outside through which the system constitutes itself. The process is more complex and paradoxical: The other is really becoming present and is represented in the inner space of the system.

17. Ahmed, *Declarations of Whiteness*, 1–59.

Yet, at the same time, the resonance of the other in the system, its changing repercussion *within* is exposed/suspended. The other is present in the mode of an “as if,” without being able to effectively unfold its validity. A masquerade of the system takes place that adorns itself with openness and reference to an outside, but at the same time prevents its performance.

The examples reconstructed above all reveal this dynamic. The performative contradictions described there presuppose this dynamic of autoimmunization.

- In Leuven, the “other,” “exotic” subjects are present, perhaps even actively recruited and sought—but they do not effectively change the interpretive sovereignty of European systems of reference and interpretation.
- The thematic presence of de-/postcolonial thinking in Austrian and German contexts does not transform its reproduction in the practice of teaching, research, church pastoral work.
- In the context of religious education research, “the other world” of the students and teachers in the school context is didactically taken up, but at the same time it does not come to bear with its own authority, as Maike describes.
- University teaching constructs learning areas in order to educate students, but at the same time suspends their education and keeps them at a distance from the object of learning.
- Rica reports on women in the academic context in Manila, who are present and also heard there, but whose recognition and validity are simultaneously undermined in ironic, invective jokes.

The “*as-if*” *presence of the other* is a fundamental dynamic in the colonial reproduction of power asymmetries. Throughout our autoethnographic cases, this paradoxical autoimmunization of hegemonic power becomes visible as a general pattern operating in (decolonial theological) knowledge production. It allows for a closer understanding of how coloniality is perpetuated: *as mimicry-decoloniality embodied/performed precisely where critiques of coloniality are practiced*. The core of this strategy/pattern consists in the suspension of the authority of the “other” in the very same act of its representation.

This autoimmunization is generated by a specific style of knowledge production that the Frankfurt School understood as “instrumental knowledge” or “instrumental rationality,” by functional knowledge. In and by the production of knowledge, we normally identify objects and make them available. We can *do* something with what we know. It can take on a practical meaning for “us” as a society and function. Such knowledge

“works.” For an academic system, including academic theology, knowledge has an even more specific function: It effects the self-justification of the system. Theology as a science produces knowledge, and precisely by producing it, it justifies itself in its relevance. The successful production of knowledge is the basic performance of theology, from which it draws its own legitimacy. Whatever interferes with the reproduction of this knowledge and its function provokes the danger that the production of relevance and recognition in the scientific system will fail, and must therefore be eliminated. Rica’s piece speaks in particularly strong ways to the pain caused by these dynamics for those who “pose a problem” to established ways of (re-)producing knowledge. When knowledge and beliefs appear that challenge theology in its academic functioning—i.e., plea for changes at a more fundamental level, regarding the frames of reference and interpretive logics—this causes defensive reflexes. The “other” is then allowed to possibly become present, but is simultaneously neutralized in its effect on knowledge reproduction and its guiding paradigms. Theological knowledge undermines decolonial contestation in order to maintain its own functioning and legitimacy.

3. Theological patterns of thought as driving forces of mimicry-decoloniality

However, such mimicry-decoloniality is not simply the result of the academic disciplining of theological reasoning into functional knowledge. Rather, we can unearth in the productions of auto-immunity thought patterns that were shaped by the Christian tradition. They range from soteriological hopes to ecclesiological structures to the “core” pattern of Christian thought and tradition: the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

3.1 *Theopolitical visions and the hope of salvation*

Arguably, mimicry-decoloniality is a theological performance in which soteriological constellations of contrition and absolution, guilt and innocence are operative to effect auto-immunity against the effective appearance of the “other” in academia, and beyond. The paradox of non-performativity of anti-racist academic writing referenced above in Sigrid’s vignette offers a point in case for such a theo-logic at work in mimicry-decoloniality that we can unfold in more detail by drawing on critical voices within decolonial studies. In her style analysis of “positionality statements” by scholars in Critical Whiteness Studies, Robyn Westcott, for example,

shows that these recognitions of racial privilege are performed in a ritual sequence of codifiable elements that are patterned by the Christian rite of confession. Informed by the desire for exoneration, they are framed by “a teleology of salvation”¹⁸, in which utterances of guilt and atonement tend to be conflated such that they facilitate “cathartic pleasure”¹⁹ and “narrative resolution”²⁰. Following the genre of confession, which signifies at once apology and restoration of innocence, White recognitions of a racist history do not bring about transformation. Instead, the form of confession allows the White subject to alleviate itself of historical entanglement into the history of racializing colonialism and to thus achieve a “reconciliation with [its] racial position”²¹ and to experience its restitution as “sanctioned and sanctified.”²² Such “racialized productions of innocence”²³ are a core component of White supremacy: They allow to maintain a claim to the moral superiority of the White subject that has powered modern colonial enterprises,²⁴ even as it purports to acknowledge historical guilt. In the very act of recognition of its culpability in colonial trauma, it effects paradoxical autoimmunity against a dismantling of its moral and political sovereignty.

The liability to make such problematic claims to innocence, we can argue with Gil Andjar,²⁵ is deeply embedded in the foundational Christian narrative of Christ Jesus, the innocent victim, as the warrant of salvation. Inviting identification with Christ, it provides a mold for Christians to

18. Robyn Westcott, “Witnessing Whiteness: Articulating Race and the ‘Politics of Style,’” *Borderlands* 3 (2004): 38.

19. Westcott, “Witnessing Whiteness,” 31.

20. Westcott, “Witnessing Whiteness,” 22.

21. Westcott, “Witnessing Whiteness,” 23.

22. Westcott, “Witnessing Whiteness,” 22.

23. Marika Rose, “For Our Sins: Christianity, Complicity and the Racialized Construction of Innocence” in *Exploring Complicity. Concept, Cases and Critique*, ed. Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, Michael Neu (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 53–64.

24. Cf. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

25. Cf. Sonja Luehrmann, Review of “Anidjar, Gil. 2014. *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*,” <https://www.new-directions.sps.ed.ac.uk/blood-critique-christianity-book-review/>: “Consisting of an introduction focused on Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Critique of Violence’ and a conclusion engaging with Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, [the frame of the book] offers a diagnosis of Christianity’s central problem that is somewhat independent of the rest of the text. As Jewish thinkers, both Benjamin and Freud point to Christianity as a system of thought whose agents see themselves as victims of violence rather than perpetrators. Christianity ‘puts the victim at the center of history’ (11) and ‘turned the cult of the dead father into a worship of the murdering son as innocent’ (251). This recalls Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of Christian morality as slave morality fueled by resentment, and would indicate that Christians, even where they hold political power, might be predisposed to misrecognize themselves as weak, and lack ethical tools for recognizing and working with power.”

see themselves as powerless and innocent, even as they gained social influence and political power, leaving them unequipped to theologically recognize and ethically manage power. As an upshot, there is a dearth in perpetrator theologies which would allow Christians to place themselves rightly in the multifaceted tradition of Christianity that has engendered both, life-giving as well as death-bearing practices. Reckoning with the ambiguous political effects of Christian practices, Jennifer Harvey holds, would make it necessary for some Christians not to identify, but to “dis-identify with Jesus.”²⁶ Yet, as Sarah Pinnock has argued, theological approaches that seek to differentiate “authentic” lifegiving Christian practices from those that “abuse” the tradition as an instrument of oppressive power²⁷ do not fully capture the profundity of the theopolitical problem of innocence. Imagining the realm of the saved as a space free(d) from potentially violent power relations, it has unleashed a history of violence of its own: Arguably, it is precisely such a utopian soteriology, that purifies imaginations of salvation from the complexities of history, which has sponsored the theopolitical cosmovision of modern coloniality. Locating salvation in a realm beyond power, it has allowed to establish clear distinctions between transcendence and immanence, between salvation history and profane history – theological distinctions that then all too easily translated into more political distinctions between the saved and the damned, Christians and heathens, White and Black, masters and slaves.²⁸ The theopolitical claim to Christian innocence sponsors a colonizing soteriology that, in “nothing less than a theological operation,”²⁹ makes whiteness both a benchmark of progress and an icon of salvation.

In critique of the political and economic effects of coloniality, theological movements since the mid-20th century have sought out other sources to narrate the history of salvation. Embracing a preferential option for the poor, they promote a turn to the experiences of the marginalized as a soteriological locus. Yet, this theological turn can only have a decolonizing effect if it also challenges the binary theological coding of transcendence and immanence that has sponsored coloniality. Living in the wake of

26. Jennifer Harvey, “What Would Zacchaeus Do? The Case for Disidentifying with Jesus,” in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 86–99.

27. Sarah Pinnock, “Atrocity and Ambiguity: Recent Developments in Christian Holocaust Responses,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2007): 499–523.

28. Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century,” in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11 (2013): 79–83.

29. Willie J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 31.

colonial trauma, the marginalized have complex stories to tell about wounding and healing that do not easily culminate in closure and restoration—here, we find stories of survival that do not allow for straight-forward demarcations between life and death, sin and innocence.³⁰ Only when these complex experiences become the point of construction for soteriology, can the option for the poor effect a “radical break in [the] epistemology”³¹ of colonial theology. If theology, however, subjects these experiences to the teleological arch of a utopian soteriology, in which salvation is ultimately figured as transcendence of the powerful contingencies of history, its turn to marginalized voices ends up reinscribing rather than disrupting the colonial world order. Instead of attending to the complex experiences of the excluded, this theology abstracts from histories of suffering a foil against which it can—by way of dialectical negation—speak to a history of salvation that is purified from the contingencies of history. Experiences of marginalization here become a conceptual function for upholding a theology of innocence that has sponsored colonial world ordering. Here, the precarious experiences of living-on in the wake of trauma do not become building blocks towards a soteriology that disrupts racialized constructions of innocence. They are not given the authority to unsettle colonial theology but are used as raw material for re-constructing a hegemonic form of theology in sponsorship of oppression, which, as J. Albert Harrill points out, has always found the bodies of enslaved people “good to think with.”³² Unless it deconstructs the utopian tenets that uphold the binary distinctions of the colonial world order, a theological option for the poor does not affect real decolonization but engages in what we can call with Matthew Elia “thinking with slaves”³³: It performs a paradoxical mimicry-decoloniality that uses marginalized bodies as metaphorical tools to serve the conceptual needs of masters while erasing the complex experiences of marginalized lives.

30. Judith Gruber, “Salvation in a Wounded World. Towards a Spectral Theology of Mission,” *Mission Studies* 37, no. 3 (2020): 372–394.

31. K.C. Abraham, “Taking the Poor Seriously: An Interpretive Report,” in *Spirituality of the Third World: A Cry for Life: Papers and Reflections from the Third General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, January, 1992, Nairobi, Kenya*, ed. Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 207.

32. J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Moral, and Social Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 26.

33. Matthew Elia, “Slave Christologies: Augustine and the Enduring Trouble with the ‘Form of a Slave’ (Phil 2:5-7),” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 75, no. 1 (2021): 19–32.

3.2 *The power of the church to construct realities of salvation and innocence*

Jennifer Harvey's call to "dis-identify with Jesus" seems paradox at first sight but reveals an ambivalence within Christian theology that the attempt to decolonize theology makes obvious. Even if Gal 3:28 overcomes the binary opposition between free and slave, Jew and Greek, male and female, there are performative acts that—by way of autoimmunization—privilege the racialized and gendered masters' discourse over the marginalized even when pretending to speak in the voice of the oppressed. Similarly, even when the literal whitewashing of Jesus in pieces of art has been overcome since colonial times, theological and ecclesial discourses perpetuate a praxis of subtle whitewashing that is not reflected upon. Thus, at first hand it seems justified to dis-identify with Jesus if incarnation is equalized with the Jesus of a White western patriarchal elite discourse. However, a decolonial perspective in theology not only raises an awareness of racialized powerful and culpable claims to innocence, it also helps to deconstruct these discourses and unmask their epistemological presumptions.

When identifying with Jesus one usually forgets that there is an abyss that prevents us from laying hands on the "real" or "original" Jesus. When relating to Jesus one is dependent on a complex structure of reference. The only way to relate to Jesus is via witness. Normally, witness is seen as a positive marker of the Christian identity. It is only by way of hearing the witness of others that faith in Jesus Christ stays alive—the profound abyss between Jesus' death on the cross and the experience of resurrection is only overcome by witness. Yet, when Christian witness of the resurrection started, the historic Jesus was not there anymore. Thus, the not-giveness of Jesus is sign of the ambivalence of the Christian faith; at the same time that revelation in Jesus Christ and Christian witness of it are intertwined they are separated. When talking about Jesus Christ we are not directly in relation to Jesus Christ but in the powerful realm of the church as witness and identity marker. However, the church not only guarantees the Christian identity, it also imperils it. For the church produces the knowledge system in which theopolitics is at work and which in a subtle way stabilizes the aforementioned autoimmunizations. From a decolonial perspective, the witness of the church still often turns witness into whiteness, thus provoking the call to dis-identify with Jesus.

Therefore, it is helpful to read God-talk through a decolonial lens. Theology only works by way of language and discourse. Testimony is the only means to relate to what happened at Easter, there is no un-mediated experience of God outside the realm of language. The language of

testimony is found, handed on and controlled in the community of the church. That is why ecclesiology—the reflection of the identity and performance of the church—must be at the center of every decolonial reflection in theology. Ecclesiology is where all the topics and tools of postcolonial theories find their expression within theology; the church is the place where identities are negotiated by way of discourse. This discourse which not only reflects but constructs reality is a power-ridden enterprise marked by an imbalance of power to define and to be defined and a binary opposition between center and multiple peripheries.³⁴ As Christian faith is shaped and invented by the church discourse in a normative manner that defines what is orthodox and what is heterodox there is no institutionalized questioning or critique of these ecclesiological power. This dynamic has become particularly explicit in the Roman Catholic Church—here, what the church in the form of the magisterium says has to be taken for granted as it defines the space of being Christian and the boundaries thereof. This community of faith defined by the church makes the attempt to decolonize theology all the more ambivalent and challenging. It means one not only has to put one's own theological thinking under scrutiny but one also has to reflect how theology is not only an academic task but defined by, dependent on, and restricted by the identity discourse of the church—possibly subconsciously reproducing and enforcing colonial patterns one wants to overcome.³⁵ When one wants to address the paradox of autoimmunization one has to deal with the church not only as a positive warrantor of the Christian faith but also as a system of power that operates through exclusion to preserve the power of some over others. The self-justification that operates unquestioned in the church as identity marker has to be put under scrutiny to break up seemingly self-evident patterns.

Insights from postcolonial theories and Critical Whiteness Studies can help to raise an awareness for structures of self-justification and autoimmunization at work in ecclesial discourses. It has been mentioned earlier, that privileges are felt only by those in a marginalized position and not by the privileged ones—also within the church. This thought can be expanded

34. Sigrid Rettenbacher, "Theology of Religions in a Postcolonial Perspective: Epistemological and Ecclesiological Reflections," in *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and New Frontiers*, ed. Paul Hedges, Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi, and Elizabeth Harris (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 267–284, 273f, 280f; Sigrid Rettenbacher, *Außerhalb der Ekklesiologie keine Religionstheologie. Eine postkoloniale Theologie der Religionen*, Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2019).

35. Cf. For example the power politics involved in (not) granting the *nilhil obstat*: Jasmine K. Gani and Jenna Marshall, "The Impact of Colonialism on Policy and Knowledge Production in International Relations," *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January 2022): 5–22.

to the insight that Charles Mills calls “White ignorance.”³⁶ While marginalized people have an interest to understand the world of the (privileged) others to prevent detrimental and harmful situations, privileged groups do not have an interest in understanding the world of the marginalized ones as it would severely question their own worldview and habits. Privileged groups thus accept a status of *active ignorance*—refusing to know things that could be known—in order not to be compelled to interrogate their own presuppositions. This is also true for the church. There is often an unreflected differentiation in theology or the church between that which one cannot speak about because it is linked to the vastness of the divine mystery which transcends human insights and that which one does not want to talk about because it would put into question some insights or privileges one—at least those who profit from them—does not want to give up.³⁷ Thus, the sacramental character of the church of being a sign for the presence of God is jeopardized by not paying attention to the difference between that which one cannot know about God and that which one does not want to know. One has to ask if the excluded discourses within the church are really signs of heresy—that they endanger our image or knowledge of God—or if they—when looking more closely—only endanger the privilege of the privileged ones and are therefore excluded from the church’s knowledge systems.³⁸

3.3 *Three anaesthetizing patterns of thought: Soteriological—ecclesiological—incarnational*

The preceding considerations have reconstructed some patterns of thought and argumentation that justify and promote the autoimmunization and mimicry-coloniality of academic theology, whether it be soteriological, ecclesiological, or incarnation-theological.

In the aforementioned *soteriological thought patterns*, the “other,” above all the real recognition of guilt and change, is to a certain extent immobilized or anaesthetized. On the one hand, this happens with a specific soteriological perspective on the past. An earlier colonial history of guilt is indeed considered, and forms of apology and reconciliation are even

36. Charles Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., (State University of New York: 2007): 11–38.

37. Sigrid Rettenbacher, “Worüber man nicht spricht ... Eine Theologie des Ungesagten,” in *Spielarten der Macht. Theologie orten und räumen mit Hans-Joachim Sander*, ed. Christian Kern, Judith Gruber, and Christian Bauer (Ostfildern: Matthias Grunewald Verlag, 2024), 251–286.

38. *Ibid.*

sought. But this perception of one's own history of guilt does not necessarily lead to a real change in the colonial vision of the world and the asymmetrical practices and views in which it is incarnated and practiced. On the contrary, the practices of reconciliation with the colonial history of guilt make it possible to maintain—and even strengthen—positions of colonial, White innocence and to secretly reconcile oneself with them, i.e. in effect to perpetuate them.

Such an anaesthetization of change, an autoimmunization, can also occur in a historical-theological perspective with a view to the future, in the form of utopian soteriologies. These project a perfect world into the future and justify the hope of its coming with a corresponding concept of God as a final, unambivalent liberator. What is quickly ignored are the complexities of history, including the irreconcilable experiences and the real hopelessness³⁹ that people are currently dealing and wrestling with. In such ways, soteriologies contribute to mimicry-coloniality. Although they address guilt, suffering, power asymmetries and powerlessness, and to a certain extent they “regret” them, they postpone efficient changes to nowhere.

Secondly, *ecclesiologies* also prevent decolonization and contribute to autoimmunization. Theology must be understood as fundamentally shaped by the church due to the institutional interweaving of academic theological research and the ecclesiastical institution. The church's power of definition determines discourses—both explicitly and implicitly. It can be assumed that effects also arise at the subconscious level of theologians. Churchliness is not necessarily an enabler; it is a factor of subliminal limitation and restriction. It contributes to the fact that, although innovative topics and criticism are expressed, dominant patterns continue to operate silently and unthematized in the underground, so to speak. In this context, what is not allowed to be said can also be falsely labeled as “negative theology.” Critical positions are suppressed with a reference to the unspeakability or inscrutability of God (cf. exclusion of women from the priesthood). In these cases, ecclesiology is combined with negative theology and creates silencing effects that immunize the system against another, allowing at the same time some other to be present and become visible.

These two factors flow together in an *incarnational theological pattern*: Within a classical Christian understanding of incarnation, the truth of God is linked to an earlier, past figure. God incarnates Godself in Jesus of Nazareth. In this understanding, incarnation is understood as an act in which an “archetype,” a kind of “origin” arises, from which God can then

39. Cf. Miguel A. De La Torre, *Embracing Hopelessness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017).

be perceived. This origin or archetype is, later, represented in history, especially in the history of the church seen as global witness of the risen Christ. In this understanding, tradition is the repetition or re-presentation of a preceding archetype, to which one remains normatively bound. In this sense, incarnation is “materially” positively prefigured, a principle of identity. Even if Christian culture moves into a context other than European and “inculturates” itself, this process of inculturation is relativized and marginalized within the framework of a positive-material understanding of incarnation. Elements of a “different” culture can then be absorbed, but they basically form a kind of less-central accidental (*Akzidenz*) that gives a different “look” to the original, but without affecting/effecting its core identity and substance. In principle, however, the archetype remains dominant and guiding, providing the framework and identity markers. A positive-material (positivist) understanding of incarnation thus enables a certain adaptation and absorption of others, but at the same time re-establishes an archetypal logic again and again, which secretly reproduces a first, “original,” universal image (*Urbild*) in a subtle dominant way—which substantially is a eurocentric, White and male *Gestalt* (form).

4. Are we able to stay implicated in what we critique? An aporetic interspace

The preceding considerations have reconstructed theological patterns of thought that contribute to mimicry-decoloniality. In this perception, theology talks about decolonization and claims to have a decolonizing effect. On the surface, it advocates decolonization, but behind the scenes it reproduces colonial dynamics. This is a performative (self-)contradiction; subtle forms of re-colonization take place under the sign of decolonization.

This finding has a number of critical implications. First, the more clearly this mimicry-decoloniality and the theo-logics that enable it become visible, the more they lose their self-evidence and automatic effectiveness. Critical knowledge emerges, which contains potential impulses for transformation. How would it be possible to think, speak, and act differently in order to counter the theologically based re-colonializations in one’s own decolonial thinking? How would it be possible to change even imagined decoloniality—to de-fictionalize the innocence of decolonial theology? These questions are linked to an ethical perspective. Where re-colonization takes place through decolonizing thinking, based on the theological patterns elaborated above, epistemic relations of violence are reproduced in a subtle way. Behind the mask of critique, dynamics of inclusions/

exclusions and asymmetries are perpetuated, and new ones are created, in a paradoxical mixture of revealing and concealing. The question that arises in this experience is, then: What relationship can and will affect these mechanisms (as well as the reproduction of violence), while at the same time also be strengthened in and through them?

The place in which these critical questions arise, however, can lead to a different way of thinking that again tends to become problematic. The critical perception of the reproduction of colonial patterns in one's own decolonizing efforts can overshoot the mark and turn into a new fiction, which in turn leads to a critical impulse that—to a certain extent—runs counter to the first. The critique of one's own mimicry-decoloniality can itself again generate *the ideal of practicing theology as a way of thinking that frees itself step-by-step from all coercive measures and power exertion*, including one's own hidden theological patterns that effect mimicry-coloniality. The critique of one's own mimicry-decoloniality and one's own performative contradictions then transcends into the utopia of an open discourse free of domination. Theology reappears as an ideal discourse of loving and peaceful freedom.

Theologies that cherish the hope of practicing discourses free of domination work more or less implicitly with a universal norm: Freedom and participation should be possible in a situation that is accessible to all, where all can participate. But there are good reasons to see such universalizations as a fictitious utopia with limits and with its own internal paradox, since universals are always exclusive. As Étienne Balibar points out, universals require a particular language in specific situations in order to communicate, socialize, and realize themselves as universal.⁴⁰ They formulate absolute truths that claim to count always and everywhere, but at the same time mediate themselves in specific situations and by particular means. By doing so, universals produce a performative contradiction between a generalizing claim and a particular attempt at realization, which leads to new exclusions in the name of the universal. The universal has to be “said” and “made real” in a specific form, in order to be communicable and effective, and it is in this “incarnation” of its universality, that it falls into a self-contradiction. Its universality vanishes in the need of a situational embodiment and perspectivization. If the ideal of complete absence of domination is nevertheless upheld, a new fictionalization effect or performative contradiction arises: Ideally, we strive for freedom

40. Étienne Balibar, *On Universals. Constructing and Deconstructing Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020); Cf. also Étienne Balibar, *Secularism and Cosmopolitanism, Critical Hypotheses on Religion and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 111: “intrinsic paradox of universalism.”

from domination, but in terms of embodiment, we reproduce domination at every moment. It is this awareness of the *permanent and inevitable entanglement* in the reproduction of inclusion or exclusion, of domination or subordination that comes up as a second critical insight.

And this leads, third, into a fundamental question: *Would we then simply have to give up “decolonization efforts”? Is decolonization a hopeless, desperate endeavor?* This position is not entirely convincing either. In fact, the critical reconstruction of mechanisms and patterns of thought that reproduce colonial mechanisms, as described above, gives rise to critical knowledge that goes beyond the structures and routines that were previously taken for granted. One is placed in a space of reflection that also contains the ethical impulse described above in relation to identified relations of violence. Giving up the work against de-/recolonization would mean simply accepting this violence—now in the explicit knowledge of it and the theological patterns that enable it. Giving up decolonization efforts would only be possible at the price of accepting certain structures of reproducing and accepting coloniality anew and in an intensified way—with one’s eyes open. The result would be a cynical position that performs a new kind of supremacy. One must be able to afford to reflect critically, but at the same time to renounce transformative operationalization. The entanglement in de-/colonization begins anew.

This means finally that the more one’s own mimicry-coloniality becomes visible, the more one finds oneself in a tense, aporetic in-between. Neither is decolonization simply possible, nor is its complete abandonment acceptable.

As a consequence, in such aporetic interspaces, one could be tempted to resign and to give up. Or one could shift the question from “whether complete decolonization is possible” to the question “where and how can this in-between space be shaped, in all its impurity and persistent ambivalence?” What are the implications for shaping theological work in the space between the impossibility/possibility of decolonization? Where and how is it useful and possible to constructively and critically shape the tension without losing oneself in utopias of a domination-free space of thought? In this in-between space of the impossibility/possibility of decolonization, the challenge arises, on the one hand, “to stay implicated in what [we] critique,”⁴¹ i.e. not to turn away from our own entanglement in colonial conditions and, on the other hand, not to give up any work on change. The challenge arises of daring “to stay with [or *in*] the trouble” (Haraway), of maintaining a critical restlessness in regard to the reproduction of

41. Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness,” 59.

power relations in the own practice and patterns of thought, while taking up, at the same time, the responsibility of working towards disruption, modification and change. In this interspace, transformation does not take the shape of a utopian “exitus” or “fantasy of transcendence,” but of critical-creative work *within* enduring power relations.

As the group of authors of this text, we believe it makes sense to pursue four lines of questioning that give perspective to the work in this interspace of de/colonization.

1. *Self-reflexivity*: Where and how can processes be demanded, promoted, and shaped within theological-academic work and its institutional structures that make colonial patterns critically visible and reflect on them, including the previously problematized performative paradoxical, subtle reintroduction? With the autoethnographic vignettes that we presented at the beginning, more specific paths of reflection emerge. With regard to the relationship between academic work at universities and school education, to what degree is the reality of extra-university school life truly recognized in the academic enterprise, not merely pro forma or as passive data? And how can it begin to play its own informative and transformative role in theological work processes? With regard to the design of teaching apparatuses and the composition of student groups: What prevailing colonial patterns exist in the selection and composition of teaching and learning materials, and their relationship to student groups in learning processes. Which *exitus-reditus* patterns play a role in the design of teaching/learning processes and institutional arrangements?
2. *Critical interventions*: To what extent do formats enable processes, discourses, or critical interventions that relativize, disrupt, and transform existing discourses, beyond prefigured academic master plans and its formal regime? The second autoethnographic vignette raises the specific question of how teaching/learning processes can be designed in a collaborative and processual way so that intellectual expropriations are interrupted and changed through creative reappropriations and changes of perspective. How can a learning arrangement be organized by a teaching figure to become more open to questioning and transition into open learning processes? Critical interventions are then combined with opening disruptions, i.e. with re-perspectivizations and pluralization⁴² that seek out the excluded and risk breaking it open.

42. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Decolonizing the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

3. *Critique of styles and regimes of forms*: In this perspective, academic work and its critical reflection is not limited to content and methods, but also includes questions of style and formal repertoire. Firstly, this concerns the forms of work and expression (output) of academic work: Which forms of exploration and expression of academic theological work are considered recognizable and meaningful forms of presentation? What form makes knowledge recognizable as such? Which styles of representation and communication are “permissible” and acceptable, which are less so or not at all?⁴³ How much exclusionary power is there in the formal regime of academic work? As one of the autoethnographic vignettes shows, this question of perspective not only concerns the output forms of theological research, but also the forms of interaction between the actors involved. Tone colors, allusions, and undertones subtly reproduce hierarchies or marginalization. Jokes, for example, can, as shown, become subtle instruments of subtle exclusion and belittlement, although at the same time the conversation is ostensibly participatory. What role do irony, humor, sarcasm, cynicism, friendliness play in theology and how do they contribute to mimicry-coloniality?
4. *Wounded realism*: Intellectual work is wounded and further wounds the agents involved. The autoethnographic vignettes hint at situations in which the vulnerability and wounding force of academic theological work is revealed. This being wounded and wounding is present in the biographies of researchers, but it also emerges on a deeper epistemological level. Thinking and configuring something always involves indirectly or directly addressing the failures and ruins of the past. Successes in thinking emerge from experiences of failure and remain accompanied by their shadows. In theology, this translates to our own discourses, including discourses on the church, God, and salvation. They result from a history of theological thinking that has never been pure or “neutral.” Theology is born out of ways of thinking, acting and believing that have had and actually have destructive effects. Doing theology today implicates to generate, produce, and develop thinking, that builds on experiences of being wounded and wounding others. Nor is this form of knowledge production “neutral” or “healing,” even if it talks about salvation and hope of everlasting life, nor is it pure, free, and sovereign. Where and how do we, as theologians who reflect about de/colonization, confront this wounded realism and take a critical distance from academic fictions of sovereignty, neutrality, and purity?

43. Cf. Grosfoguel, “Structure of Knowledge”.

De/colonial theology that follows these perspectives takes on a different character. It becomes open to the effectiveness of the “other,” its disruptions, its wounds and scars, to which societies and people are exposed, but which they performatively and paradoxically conceal again and again through mimicry-decoloniality for the sake of their own security and innocence.

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