# Postcolonial Christianities. Transformations of Theology as a Part of Global Decolonization

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*Abstract*

In the past, Christianity often was used to legitimize and expand colonial rule. If, in the present, it intends to be 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 as a 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 the resistance that theology both encounters and is able to enact. 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.

*Key-Words*

Postcolonialism, Theology, Bible, Coloniality, Decolonial Turn, Liberation

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. 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 shouldn't 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" (Kwok 2005: 77). 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" (Kwok 2005: 77).

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.

In this short presentation of postcolonial theologies, I am going to explain the concept of *Coloniality of theology*, and proceed then 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. 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 it only copied it (Estermann 2017: 158).

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 (1992: 11) coined the concept of "coloniality of power" 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" (1992: 12). Edgardo Lander (2000) extends the Quijanian concept of the coloniality of power to the epistemological and academic field, speaking of the "coloniality of knowledge".

Following Quijano and Lander, we can also speak of the coloniality of theology (Silber 2021: 138). 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.[1] 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,[2] 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

1 See, for this variety of transformations and articulations: Elizalde Prada et al. 2017; Estermann 2013; Panotto 2019; Rojas Salazar 2018; Rufin Pardo et al. 2017.

2 See, among others, Estermann 2017; Nehring/Tielesch 2013; Silber 2018; Tamayo 2020.

the so-called "Theologies of the South" (Tamayo 2020), 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 into theology.

However, in the eagerness to learn from decolonial criticism, the danger of what Canadian indigenous sociologist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "cognitive extractivism" (Grosfoguel 2016) 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 (Grosfoguel 2016: 42). Decolonial learning can only be carried out from a "deep reciprocity" (Simpson, cit. by Grosfoguel 2016: 41), 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 Josef Estermann (2017: 158) calls "an epistemological act of humility".

## *2. Fundamental thrusts of postcolonial theologies*

Postcolonial theologies cover a wide range of problems and challenges and present different perspectives in their approach, which is why it seems fair to me to differentiate these perspectives in four fundamental thrusts or directions. 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 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 something similar, if we consult the King James Version of the text or many other English translations.[3] 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".[4] 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 not only 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 (Mena-López et al. 2018: 134).

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 independ-

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

4 See [https://morningstarinfosys.com/song-of-songs/].

ence 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 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" (Mena-López et al. 2018: 134). 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: "Populated 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" (Hölzl 2012: 12-13).

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" (Dube 2000: 3). The story reflects a painful experience made by many peoples for centuries[5]. Dube's parents themselves suffered the theft of their land by the British colonizers and had to take refuge in the neighboring country. Also 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 (Budden 2009: 20).

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 (Healy 2019: 73-95). 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 it is communal and not an individual property. Some indigenous peoples conceive of the land not as a geographical extension, but as a network of trails and paths: It makes no sense to attribute ownership to it. Others relate it to the ancestors or to local spirits. Australian theologian Chris Budden (2009: 21) notes that "the Aboriginals were part of the land and it was part of them. When they lost their land, they lost themselves". If there exists an intimate reciprocity between land and peoples that is sacred,

5 See Koschorke's contribution in this volume.

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 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" (2020: 404). 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" (Ashcroft 2014: 5).

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 efforts resistance 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'kmaw 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 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" (Donaldson 2002: 100).

Donaldson (2002: 100) refers to the Mi'kmaw woman's "double cross" 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 (cf. Müßig 2020).

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 (1999: 143), 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" (Donaldson 1999: 143).

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

Although, in many cases, up to now, the label of the decolonial turn has not been accepted for these theological currents, it is obvious that their practices of unmasking the discursive and power structures that impede freedom and justice are profoundly related to postcolonial and decolonial strategies that seek the deconstruction of coloniality.

For a decolonial reconstruction and transformation of theology, the worldviews of those 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, popular and suburban spaces, among others.

Indigenous people have already begun to develop theological movements that depart 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 (Bascopé 2006: 1-16). 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 already 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 (Silber 2023: 99-130). 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 in projection to different objectives, criticism of colonial epistemology and the construction of liberating theological projects are 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 Mignolo who characterizes the decolonial turn as "detachment and openness": 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 may become a tool for decolonizing. In my opinion, both meanings are necessary and helpful: After centuries of theologies 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" (1990: 9).

It is necessary to decolonize theology in its whole wide range. It is obvious that the disciplines of Church history, missiology, 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. But the same applies to biblical sciences, foundational and systematic theology and other theological disciplines. The epistemic transformation that respects other knowledge and alternative methods that are practiced in postcolonial theologies will require to rebuild theology in all areas of its knowledge and from its roots.

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.

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.

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