

DECOLONIZING CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Decolonial Turns in Catholic Theology
 Convenor: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University
 Moderator: Rufus Burnett, Jr., Fordham University
 Presenters: Gerald Boodoo, Duquesne University
 Joseph Drexler-Dreis, Xavier University of Louisiana
 Melissa Pagán, Mount Saint Mary's University

This session was a panel discussion engaging three questions moderated by Rufus Burnett.

1. How has decolonial theory become a resource for your theology?

Joseph Drexler-Dreis has confronted the problems of inequality, exploitation, and expropriation in relation to a theology that calls itself progressive, but obliquely justifies these conditions, conceals them, and fails to question them. The decolonial turn offers resources to use in liberation theology to address these problems by offering an analysis of the world system that enables delinking from these situations and relinking with promising options. Bothered by the commodification of the aesthetics of radical discourse, decolonial theory criticizes dominant structures of meaning without abstractions and without avoiding material conditions in their world making projects.

Melissa Pagán discovered in decolonial theory a resource as a Catholic ethicist in the United States struggling with the gaps in many forms of post-colonialist and liberationist thinking that are not wrestling with situations in the Caribbean and Puerto Rico, in particular issues of bodies and land in relation to coloniality. Not initially influenced by the usual decolonial theorists, she was shaped by queer feminist theorists of color and preoccupied with the exploitation of the land in Catholic ethics. This enabled her to approach historical, biblical, and theological texts when considering relationality and norms and the fate of colonial and diasporic subjects by decentering Eurocentric ethics.

Gerald Boodoo was raised in Trinidad and Tobago and received a British education by scholars from the centers of power in Europe. They disregarded the wisdom and ways of knowing from his native home and from the global south more widely. When he returned home, he knew little about the lives of those from his native land. He desired to crack open his own culture and learn from post-colonial thinking from Caribbean and African authors. Decolonial theory offered an important resource in filling out the picture, but it is not everything.

2. What are the challenges that decolonial theory and praxis raise for liberationist and contextual approaches to theology?

Drexler-Dreis noted that Walter Mignolo's and Catherine Walsh's decolonial theory offers a perspective and connecting term that brings together the material world and ideological structures rather than an interdisciplinary system and offers a political strategy for delinking and relinking major themes in theology: Exodus, Reign of God, Queer Holiness.

Pagán explained that the types of challenges that decolonial thought brings to liberation theology include attention to who is being neglected, e.g., women of color and queer women. Liberation theologians often lack an engagement with Gloria Alzaldúa on border thinking. She argued that we need to confront the decolonial woes associated with liberationist grand approaches by reclaiming the voices of women of color without deferring to Eurocentric views of sexuality and gender. Decolonial feminism troubles our understanding of freedom.

Boodoo noted that all of our structures of living are shaped by and through coloniality. He argued that liberationist and contextual theologies are inevitably infected with colonialism.

3. How is decolonial theory criticized and what is your own assessment of this criticism?

Drexler-Dreis stated that we tend to use decolonial theory within theology with apologetic interests. Hermeneutical gymnastics can occur in which we try to make something fit that doesn't really fit. Radical aesthetics can be a tool of inclusion, rather than the exodus. Decolonization can be a metaphor for social justice and anti-capitalist projects. He noted several questions that must be considered and trends about which we should be cautious. Why is it necessary to use decolonization? We don't need to use it and we can stretch it too far. It can be excluding rather than including. We need to consider what it adds. We conflate inclusivist projects with decolonizing. Gloria Alzadúa and Franz Fanon would find this all confusing. Social location is conflated with border thinking and epistemic problems. To whom is decolonial theory responsible? It can become an episteme and not a historical struggle.

Pagán noted that the problem within decolonial theory is that it doesn't adequately address feminist ethics, gender, and sexuality. We haven't delinked these issues. Moreover, there is very little treatment of "the land" and this is a dangerous neglect, which otherwise simply contributes to patterns of colonization. All anticolonial projects need to explore how we address this issue more effectively.

Boodoo stated decolonial theory and liberation theology deserve this kind of critique. Decolonial theory includes Latin America into the history of colonization. The theological enterprise likes to feed on itself. Decolonizing thinking is trying to deprovincialize Latin America into global colonial history. This is very dangerous. The theological enterprise tries to feed on itself and must be critiqued.

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