

DECOLONIZING CATHOLIC THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Sites of Decoloniality
 Convener: Rufus Burnett, Jr., Fordham University
 Presenter: Mark Freeland, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee
 Respondents: Cecilia Titizano, Jesuit School of Theology, Santa Clara University
 Steven J. Battin, University of Notre Dame

This year the Decolonizing Catholic Theology Interest Group set out to fulfill its goal to engage with a decolonial project in a site or location. Alongside the concurrent session, this goal was fulfilled with a pre-conference tour of Minowakiing (Milwaukee) and the Electa Quinney Institute for American Indian Education. The tour ended with a fire circle led by the resident elder Vern “Turtle” Altman. The concurrent session featured a guest lecture by Mark Freeland entitled, “Minowakiing as the Good Land: Milwaukee and the Decolonization of Indigenous Relationships to Land and Life,” and responses by Steven Battin and Cecilia Titizano.

Freeland’s lecture exposed how settler colonialism persists in Minowakiing and Turtle Island by misrepresenting and dislocating American Indian life ways and languages. As an example, Freeland offered an analysis of the reductive “hunter gatherer” trope often used to render Indigenous ways of relating to the land as “primitive” in comparison to Euro-American ways. Freeland identified how “hunter gatherer” misrepresents Indigenous life ways in the US by erasing their farming innovations. The “hunter gatherer” trope, as Freeland discussed, made way for the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Johnson v. M’Intosh* case of 1823 in which Indigenous peoples were alienated from their ways of conferring and rescinding titles to their lands. For Freeland, the language used to justify Chief Justice John Marshall’s opinion in *Johnson v. M’Intosh* illustrates the settler colonialist construction of a “fictive native.” Freeland’s lecture worked to dislocate the “fictive native” by reflecting upon aadizookaanag, an Anishinaabemowin origin narrative. From the worldview implied in aadizookaanag, Freeland argued that decolonization is an activity of restoring Minowakiing to—the good, beautiful, and plentiful *place*—and wresting it from structures of settler colonialism. These structures, transformed the place of *Minowakiing* to *Menewuk*, the Potawatomi term which means “the place where we were led away by hand.” Decolonizing in Minowakiing, according to Freeland, means restoring the Anishinabe relationship to manidoo, the life energy that connects humans and other living beings in a given space. As Freeland argued, manidoo is often “euroformed” into Christian theological notions of spirit and Spirit, which dislocate manidoo and its connectedness to particular spaces. Similarly, Freeland argued that European Christian notions of history and linear time often dislocate the spatial and horizontal ways in which Indigenous peoples commune with their ancestors and the environment. To conclude, Freeland offered that if decolonizing Catholic theology is possible, then it would have to follow the language and logics of Indigenous thought in order that it might sufficiently eradicate, rather than “repudiate” and “rescind,” the violent consequences of the doctrine of discovery.

In response to Freeland, Cecilia Titizano drew connections to her perspective as an Andean/Qolla person. She contributed that her work and Freeland’s are based upon

“systematic philosophical treatises” or “cosmologies.” In her remarks, she argued that decolonizing Christianity should begin with the reality of cosmological difference and work against the colonial logics that “euroform” Turtle Island and Abya Yala. Similar to Freeland’s reflections on manidoo, Titizano offered that the Andean term for life energy, Ajayu, is also misrepresented and translated as Spirit. Titizano contended that theological decolonization must work to end what she referred to, following Brazilian anthropologist, Viveiros de Casto, as the “equivocation” of euro-Christian and Indigenous concepts. Titizano closed her reflection by offering that decolonizing Catholic theology requires delinking from essentialist Platonic interpretations of Christianity and the rethinking of Christian doctrine in light of the major challenges that “indigenous philosophical systems” present to Christianity.

Steven Battin’s reflection on Freeland’s lecture offered important points of distinction between what is referred to by the interest group as “decolonial theory” and what he referred to as “Indigenous movements.” Indigenous movements, such as those referenced by Freeland and Titizano, are not, according to Battin, privileging or explicitly adding to the discursive work of decolonial theorists. Rather, they are actively engaged in their own analysis of domination which develops out of their lived experiences of colonial domination. Echoing Titizano and Freeland, Battin affirmed that decolonizing Catholic theology requires a commitment to sites of decolonial praxis where the activity of regenerating Indigenous life ways is embodied and active. Echoing insights set out in Freeland’s book, *Aazheyaddizi: Worldview, Language and Logics of Decolonization*, Battin stressed that it is crucial for theologians to understand that Indigenous movements are rooted in *spatiality* in which relationship, balance, and equilibrium are the goals, “not temporal progress.”

Other participants in the session raised questions and offered comments about the efficacy of decolonizing Catholic theology. One participant asked about Indigenous autonomy and Christian reception and whether or not Indigenous receptions of Christian ideas were fundamentally the result of colonialist coercion. Another participant asked about the Bible and how biblical scholarship figures into decolonizing theology. These and other questions remained open as the session came to a close. In all, the session concluded with a sobering appreciation of the challenge that Indigenous worldviews and movements bring to theological reflection.

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