

Postcolonial Theologies

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Postcolonial theologies critically examine the influence of colonialism on theology and develop strategies for dealing with its problematic effects in the present day. They emerged from a global academic movement aimed at coming to terms with the legacy of colonialism. They now cover virtually all areas and topics in theology.

Table of Contents

1. Emergence and Foundations

2. Foundational Questions in postcolonial Theologies

3. The Entire Spectrum of Theology

4. Contexts and Subjects

5. Critique

Recommended Literature

Citations

Citation Style

Metadata

Editorial Note

Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

1. Emergence and Foundations

Postcolonial studies originated in literary research conducted in former British and French colonies in Africa and Asia in the decades following independence. This research demonstrated a long-lasting, subconscious dependence on the intellectual, economic, and political structures of colonialism. Edward Said's  *Orientalism* (1978) is considered the first fundamental work in this field. From literary studies, postcolonial criticism quickly spread to numerous other academic fields, including theology.

A similar parallel development in Latin America accentuated from the outset more explicitly economic and political continuities with colonialism. These continuities are referred to by Aníbal Quijano  as *coloniality*. In order to draw greater attention to the need to overcome coloniality, works in Latin America that are critical of colonialism often use

the self-designation “decolonial.” However, it is not possible to maintain a clear distinction or even separation between the two currents (post- and decolonial) in terms of content.

Since around the turn of the millennium, there has been a growing number of theological publications inspired by postcolonial studies.^[1] Initially, the focus was on biblical, missionary, and religious studies topics, but the methodology was quickly adopted by feminist theologians and now encompasses virtually all areas and topics of theology. From around 2013, postcolonial theologies have also found a reception in Germany.^[2]

2. Foundational Questions in postcolonial Theologies

The fundamental problem addressed by postcolonial studies is the continuity of colonial ways of thinking and power structures after the end of colonialism. Even decades (or, as in the case of Latin America, centuries) after state independence, coloniality can still be detected. Postcolonial theologies draw attention to a double connection between theology and colonialism: on the one hand, the theology of the colonial era served to legitimize European expansion, subjugation, and exploitation of entire continents. On the other hand, the development of theology over the past five hundred years has always been shaped by the same philosophical currents that formed the intellectual background of colonialism. This interdependence is exposed in postcolonial theologies in order to resist it and break free from it.

The diversity of colonial power structures corresponds to a diversity of theological colonialities: these include political and economic subjugation, land grabbing, genocide, slavery, the devaluation of other religions, and patriarchy (cf. art. Feminist Theologies). Postcolonial theological criticism also focuses on the mental and epistemic structures that are expressed in and enable concrete power claims, such as the European claim to superiority, *white supremacy*, the idea of progress, racism, the dominance of heteropatriarchal sexualities, the subject-object divide, and so forth. An important object of postcolonial criticism is the practice of *othering*, i.e., attributing character traits described as *different* to a group of people with the aim of dominating them.

In all these areas of experience, it is possible to identify cross-connections to theological themes. Postcolonial theology reveals the extent to which biblical and other theological texts, as well as church practices and institutions, were influenced in multiple ways by colonialism and, in turn, themselves legitimized and supported it. Since the legacies of colonialism are still operative to this day, the entire spectrum of contemporary theology must also be critically examined for its coloniality.

3. The Entire Spectrum of Theology

Similar to the way in which postcolonial studies emerged from literary studies, the initial focus of postcolonial criticism is the theological reception of biblical texts (cf. art. Exegesis). On the one hand, the aim here is to expose and criticize the misuse of biblical texts as support for colonial relations, racism, patriarchy, etc. On the other hand, however, postcolonial studies also criticizes the colonial influence on exegesis. It does so by showing the relation between the authority attributed to different readers and the power structures to which they are subject. Finally, the power relations inherent in biblical texts are also critically questioned.

Questions relating to missiology and church history formed another important early starting point. As in other areas of theology, here the question of the position and perspective of theological authors became a central focus. Numerous topics in systematic theology such as the image of God, Christology, ecclesiology, methodological and epistemological questions, ethical and socio-ethical issues (etc.) are also being critically revised. In religious studies and the theology of religion, postcolonialism is giving rise to fundamental critical questions about European concepts of religion. Areas in practical theological such as pastoral care, liturgy, canon law, and religious education^[3] are also becoming the subject of postcolonial research. The diversity of this research in postcolonial theology presently makes it impossible to speak of “postcolonial theology” in the singular. The methodological and contextual characteristics of

the various issues, approaches, and results are too diverse. At the same time, it must also be noted that postcolonial theologies are currently in a minority position in many Christian denominations,^[4] even though they are represented in a great many of them. What characterizes the global network of postcolonial theology is its ecumenical breadth and diversity as well as the mutual exchange among its practitioners.

4. Contexts and Subjects

A central hallmark of postcolonial theologies is their contextual relevance. They share this with numerous other theologies (particularly those of the Global South), such as intercultural theologies with which there is intensive methodological and personal networking. Postcolonial theologies begin with concrete contexts in which coloniality manifests itself in specific forms, which are dependent on the respective history (especially colonial history), the different cultures that come together in a given context, and subjective, individual circumstances.

In turn, the concrete subjects of postcolonial theology – in particular their associations, movements, and shared interests – also have a decisive influence on postcolonial theological reflection. For this reason, both regional, culturally influenced profiles of postcolonial theologies as well as thematic and biographical focal points are being developed.

Differentiations in postcolonial theologies also arise from cooperation and engagement with other theological currents, such as intercultural theologies, feminist and queer theologies, indigenous, African American, and other ethnically and culturally influenced theologies, liberation theologies, and so forth. Among many others, postcolonial theologies develop focal points that are critical of empire, anti-racist, sensitive to diversity, ecological and ecofeminist, interreligious and open to syncretism, as well as sensitive to trauma. What unites these various dimensions is the awareness that European colonialism is one of the main causes of these challenges and that coloniality can only be exposed and, where possible, overcome through joint resistance against its many axes.

Accordingly, interdisciplinary and intersectional analyses and practices also shape the coexistence of these numerous contexts and interests. At the same time, postcolonial feminists, for example, also distance themselves from Western feminist theologies when the latter do not take sufficient account of the specific challenge of coloniality – or, for example, indigeneity. Such critical debates, which also exist among postcolonial theologies, make it impossible to speak of a unified global movement of postcolonial theology. Rather, it is a pluralistic current that seeks to resist the manifold challenges of theological coloniality in a manner appropriate to individual contexts.

5. Critique

As a critical discipline oriented toward resistance, postcolonial theology also faces criticism, not least from within its own ranks. This criticism is very often connected to broader critiques commonly leveled at postcolonial themes and methodology; it therefore cannot always be confined to something specifically theological.

A key point of criticism focuses on postcolonial resistance to colonialism and, consequently, to Christian missionary work. This resistance is criticized for failing to acknowledge the positive contributions of these European endeavors. However, these positive contributions are not in fact the focus of postcolonial critique, which concentrates instead on the damage caused by colonialism and, in particular, its perpetuation.

Connected to this is the criticism that the departure from European ways of thinking and the turn to alternative forms of thinking and knowledge in postcolonialism represent a romantic idealization of the past. Irrespective of the fact that such idealization indeed existed (and still exists), postcolonial theologies are actually focused more so on *current* forms of knowledge that are devalued by coloniality.

A third criticism claims that postcolonial thinking focuses too much on questions of identity or that it even limits itself to them. It consequently loses sight of shared concerns that go beyond particular identities, such as economic and

political subjugation in particular. If postcolonial theologies do not allow themselves to be challenged by interdisciplinary and intersectional work, this criticism does seem justified.

Criticism also arises in relation to alleged antisemitic content in postcolonial theologies. This criticism is taken very seriously and discussed self-critically,^[5] even though it cannot be substantiated in the often generalized form of this criticism. Finally, postcolonial theologies are repeatedly criticized for questioning universal concepts that, in the past, supported the claim to power of European colonialism.^[6] This issue certainly reveals a crucial dividing line between postcolonial and European theologies, one that ought to prompt further research and debate.

Recommended Literature

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Citations

- ¹ See Duggan, Joseph, Epistemological Dissonance. Decolonizing the Postcolonial Theological “Canon”, in: Concilium 49/2 (2013), 13–23.
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- ⁵ See Levine, Amy-Jill, Roundtable Discussion. Anti-Judaism and Post-Colonial Biblical Interpretation. The Disease of Postcolonial New Testament Studies and the Hermeneutics of Healing, in: Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 20/1 (2004), 91–132.
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