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## Postcolonial theology

### A European Outlook

#### *Zusammenfassung*

Postkoloniale Fragen über das bleibende Erbe der europäischen Kolonialvergangenheit stehen im Zentrum von Postkolonialen Studien. Seit den 1990er Jahren hat eine wachsende Zahl von Theologinnen und Theologen diese Fragen adoptiert, übersetzt, und integriert in den akademischen Bereich der Theologie. Und in den letzten Jahren ist auch eine Vielzahl *europäischer* postkolonialen Theologien erschienen. In diesem Beitrag wird die Reise der postkolonialen Theologie anhand ihrer Gespräche über Religion, Gender, Befreiung und Dialog beleuchtet. Die Zukunft der postkolonialen Theologie in Europa wird als eine bleibende und multidimensionale Herausforderung der Differenz identifiziert. Die postkoloniale Theologie fordert v. a. die sog. Mainstream-, westliche Theologie dazu auf, erstens, die Legitimität afrikanischer, asiatischer, lateinamerikanischer und indigener Theologien als gleichwertige Gesprächspartner anzuerkennen, und zweitens, eine Theologie der Religionen zu konstruieren, und einen interreligiösen Dialog aufzubauen, auf Basis einer nichthierarchischen Sicht auf religiösen Differenzen. Schließlich wird darüber nachgedacht wie eine *europäische* postkoloniale Theologie das Licht dunkler europäischen Vergangenheiten reflektieren wird.

#### *Abstract*

Postcolonial questions, questions about the continued legacy of the European colonial past, are central to the field of postcolonial studies. Since the 1990s, a growing number of theologians have adopted, applied and translated them to the field of Christian theology. More recently, *European* theologians have also engaged in postcolonial exercises. This article maps this ongoing journey, highlighting conversations about religion, gender, liberation and dialogue. The future of postcolonial theology in Europe is identified as the ongoing and multidimensional challenge of difference. Postcolonial theological practice challenges especially so-called mainstream, western theological discourse, first, to recognize the legitimacy of African, Asian, Latin American and indigenous theologies as equal partners in conversation, and second, to develop a theology of the religions and an interreligious dialogue praxis based on a non-hierarchical view of religious difference. Finally, the article explores how a *European* postcolonial theology might reflect the light of Europe's dark histories.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 A personal epiphany

In 2004, when I was in my early twenties, I visited the former Dutch slave castle known as Elmina, near Accra, on the Ghanaian coast. I did not know what to expect. The Dutch history of slavery and the slave trade – and how to cope with it – had not been part of my school curriculum. To me, as a white Dutch woman, the history of colonialism, slavery, and the slave trade, was – as a Dutch saying has it – a “far-from-my-bed-show”, part of my horizon only if I so choose it to be. I felt nervous on the bus ride there. The visit to Elmina was emotionally intense from the start. It was part of the programme of the 24<sup>th</sup> assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC<sup>1</sup>), a gathering of reformed Christian churches from around the globe, which I attended as a member of the delegation of my church. For African-American delegates, the excursion to the former slave castle was especially significant, and they were very conscious of the ground we were about to walk. They were pilgrims visiting a holy site. Elmina could have been the place their ancestors had left in chains, never to return. For descendants of the enslaved, the history of colonialism, slavery, and the slave trade was personal, present and real. For me, it was mostly uncomfortable.

At the castle's gate, and even more so in the castle's chapel, I was inescapably confronted with the fact that the Dutch history of the slave trade affected me. When an African-American woman asked me what the old signs at the castle said, I deciphered and translated the old Dutch for her, with shocking ease. As if those signs talked to me, were directed at me. I realized only then, when the “far-from-my-bed-show” looked me in the eye, that what had happened there at Elmina until the nineteenth century, is real, that it is not that distant a past, that it is Dutch, and that it affects me as a white, Reformed, Christian, Dutch woman. For the most unsettling sign I read at Elmina, was a Psalm text in the castle's chapel, which the Dutch had re-located right above the female slave dungeon. The sign in the chapel reads: Zion is the Lord's resting place, this is his residence forever (*Zion is des Heeren ruste dit is syn woonplaetse in*

1 In 2006, the WARC would merge with the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) to found the current World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).

*eeuwighey. Psalm 132*). One could picture white Dutch reformed Protestants who were stationed at Elmina, singing Psalms praising God as their Lord, while underneath them enslaved women were suffering in chains. Surely the cries and smells from the dungeon must have permeated the chapel's walls? I remember thinking: if God was there at Elmina, God was not in that chapel with those Psalm-singing Dutchmen, but God was in that dungeon underneath.

The enslaved women, children and men who survived their stay in the dungeons, would be led out in chains, through the door of no return. The ocean that looks so peaceful from that point of no return, in reality took them forever away from their homelands. For many, it became their grave.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 An overview

In academia, questions about the ongoing legacy of modern European colonialism and imperialism are central to the field of postcolonial studies. Over the past decades, they found their way into the field of Christian theology, as well. This journey involves conversations with other academic fields, and conversations about ecumenical relations and inter-faith dialogue. It takes part in what Robert Schreiter (2002) has coined global emancipatory flows around gender, race, sex, liberation, ecology and human rights. Some of these conversations are highlighted in this article, and familiarize us with postcolonial theology and its early controversies. They show us how postcolonial theology can be encountered as an ambiguous effort.

For the first generation of postcolonial theologians, such as R. S. Sugirtharajah (1998), Musa W. Dube (2000), and Kwok Pui-lan (2005), who began setting the parameters, the conversation partners were postcolonial critics (see 2.1), feminist scholars (see 2.2.), liberation theology (see 2.3) and religious studies (see 2.4). Moving from biblical studies to systematic theology, the construction of a postcolonial Christology became a central concern (e. g. for Joerg Rieger (2007), Wonhee Anne

2 Thinking of Elmina, one cannot help but remember that in recent years, ongoing dehumanization of African and other people has become visible in the drowned bodies in the Mediterranean Sea, sometimes washed up on the beaches where Europeans spend our holidays (cf. Maluleke and De Jong-Kumru 2020, 159 f.).

Joh (2006), Margaret Kamitsuka (2007)). Meanwhile, theologians from every subdiscipline have engaged in postcolonial exercises, applying it to Church history, homiletics, academic training of religious teachers, ecological theology, and so on (cf. Nehring/Wiesgickl 2018; Travis 2014). Compared to the early pioneers, new generation postcolonial theologians, if you will, can also show an unapologetically eclectic combination of theological concerns (c. f. Oh 2011).

In future as in the present, postcolonial theology is located in a multidimensional challenge of difference that cannot fully be embraced without undoing Christian and European<sup>3</sup> privilege. This challenge of difference is discussed here in its interreligious, intercultural and ecumenical dimension (Küster 2011, 189). Although these dimensions cannot be separated because they overlap, I distinguish them here to identify the manifold challenges of difference. Importantly, other dimensions – such as differences between humans and other creatures, or differences between humans and posthuman AIs – are also included in the present and future challenge of difference in postcolonial theology, yet they are outside of the scope of this article.

First, postcolonial theological practice challenges so-called mainstream, western theological discourse to recognize the legitimacy of African, Asian, Latin American and indigenous theologies as theologies in their own right. This recognition is not achieved fully as long as the idea that mainstream western or European theology is *proper* theology is allowed to linger (see 3.1). Second, postcolonial discourse confronts us with the challenge and implications of a non-hierarchical view of religious difference (see 3.2). In academia, this challenge translates into the need for a postcolonial theology of religions (and a postcolonial theology of mission, cf. Hof 2016) that does not privilege western Christianity, but starts from a relocation of western Christian tradition within world Christianity and amid the diversity of the world's religions (Daggers 2013, 3).

Finally, looking forward, I argue below that it is indeed timely for postcolonial theology in Europe to address more vigorously what it means to be in Europe, on which continent the failure to embrace difference has resulted in the genocide of the European Jews (see 3.3). European

3 In this article, the terms 'Europe' and 'European' mainly refer to formerly colonizing, Western European countries, which, admittedly, does not do justice e. g. to Central and Eastern European countries.

postcolonial theology could benefit from a more thorough engagement with Jewish and Holocaust studies, and from a (re-)connection with Post-Shoah and After Auschwitz theology. Sabine Jarosch (2018), for instance, has recently started this conversation and surely in Europe today, this is not just a German, but a *European* responsibility. For how can postcolonial scholars begin to deconstruct the story of Europe as a continent of peace and prosperity since World War II, if the postwar colonial wars of independence could not break that myth of innocence that was built in the aftermath of the Holocaust? What does it mean to speak of God and the truth in postcolonial and post-Holocaust Europe? In Gutiérrez's words, how can we, as European Christian theologians, speak about God, without taking into account the Holocaust and without referring to "the corner of the dead" in colonial times and in our own age? (Gutiérrez 1987, 314f.). In short, what does it mean to be a *European* postcolonial theologian?

Depending on the imagined readership, the primary task of a postcolonial theology is often self-justification. Ironically, if the discourse gets caught up in this task, in semantics if you will, the accompanying primary risk is a loss of its critical, liberation potential (Nehring/Wiesgickl 2018, 9). As much as postcolonial academic exercises voice the prophetic over against the hegemonic, they also establish their own canon. Postcolonial theology as the embodied voice of the prophetic can remain in its calling as long as this process of canonization continues to allow for interruption (cf. Ellis 2015, 60). In Europe, studies relinking European colonial history and the history of the Holocaust, in a 'multi-directional' remembrance of their intertwinedness (cf. Rothberg 2009), represent such an interruption.

## 2 Postcolonial theology as a contested field

The irruption of postcolonial studies dates back to the 1980s. In the varied and interdisciplinary field, the term 'postcolonial' is used so diffusely that it has come to have many different meanings. The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (*PSR*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2006) tries to safeguard the effective meaning of the term by bringing the focus back to the historical process of European colonialism and its continuing effects. As Robert Young (2003, 2) states:

This division between the rest and the west was made fairly absolute in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the expansion of the European empires, as a result of which nine-tenths of the entire land surface of the globe was controlled by European, or European-derived powers. Colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed the peoples of the colonized world as inferior, childlike, or feminine, incapable of looking after themselves [...] and requiring the paternal rule of the west for their own best interests[.]

In other words, imperial power and authority were founded not only on military, political and economic power, but also on knowledge. Certain ‘knowledge’ of other peoples reinforced imperial dominance. Underlying such knowledge was the concept of race. Other peoples were persuaded to think of themselves as subordinate to white European culture. European customs, languages, literatures, and so on, were exported to the colonies as part of a civilizing mission. Consequently, the wealth of indigenous cultures became suppressed. According to the *PSR*, this historical fact of nineteenth-century European imperialism and colonialism and its ongoing effects, are to be kept in focus. However, decolonial scholars have rightly criticized this disregard for sixteenth-century European colonization (Mignolo 2011, 56).

For Edward Said – whose texts, along with those of Gayatri Spivak (esp. 1988) and Homi Bhabha (1994), are generally considered foundational to the field – postcolonial criticism is the effect of *the voyage in*. It is “the conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories” (Said 1993, 260–261.). Said calls the appearance in Europe of various people from ‘the Empire’ disquieting, because it challenges familiar metropolitan understandings of the world and its history (Childs 2008, 34). Their arrival, the voyage in, counters the colonial voyage out, of ideas and ideals from the imperial center.<sup>4</sup> In the voyage in, exiled or diaspora intellectuals from the global South are speaking and ‘writing back’ to ‘the center’, in opposition to western constructions of the world.<sup>5</sup> It is a hybrid cultural work, the voyage in.

4 Said’s definition of *the voyage out* refers to Virginia Woolf’s protagonist Richard Dalloway’s statement that he “can conceive of no more exalted aim – to be the citizen of the Empire” (Woolf 1978, 63; Childs 2008, 34).

5 Cf. the title of Salman Rushdie’s famous July 3, 1982 article in the *New York Times*: The Empire writes back with a vengeance.

(And we might expand its meaning to include migrants from countries outside the former imperial scope, such as Turkey.) The voyage in embodies the promise of change: “In an age of continued imperial structures, the voyage in is a sign of adversarial internationalization” (Said 1993, 260). In theology, the emergence of Latin American, Asian, African, and other liberation theologies – without which the advent of postcolonial theology cannot be imagined – can all be seen as part of this adversarial voyage in.

## 2.1 The contested relation between postcolonialism and Christian theology

At first sight, the introduction of postcolonialism in theology seems fitting. Demographically speaking, Christianity’s center of gravity has shifted to the global South – which is, of course, an effect of the European missionary effort. This shift calls for theological self-reflection. In the Netherlands, for example, church membership of mainline denominations is rapidly declining, whereas the number of migrant Christians is rising. Roughly 1 in 8 Christians now has a non-western cultural background.<sup>6</sup> Does our way of doing Christian theology reflect this shift or is it still rather Eurocentric in orientation? (Nehring and Wiesgikl 2018, 14). How are non-western Christians represented in academic theological discourse?

Theologies using postcolonial theory address the colonial legacy in theological discourse: its eurocentrism, its racism, its bias against other cultures, ethnicities, religions, genders and sexualities, in sum: any negative constructions of difference. A continued Eurocentric bias distorts the increased diversity within Christianity and within Christian theological discourse – and by extension, it distorts knowledge of other religions.

On a closer look, the engagement of postcolonialism by theologians is less self-evident. On the one hand, that there is a relationship between Christianity and nineteenth-century European imperialism and colonialism is commonly acknowledged by postcolonial scholars throughout the

6 In the Netherlands, for example, the number of non-western migrant Christians is estimated to be around 800,000 and rising, whereas church membership of mainline denominations is down to around 5.5 million, or 25 per cent of the population – and, more importantly, this percentage is declining still (van de Donk 2006, 156).

academy – as it was exposed early, e. g. by Jacob Haafner (1754–1809), if unsuccessfully (Haafner 1993). Christian mission and Christian theology served European colonialism: their interests intersected and there was a shared belief in European superiority (de Jong-Kumru 2013, 8; Pranger 2003). This relationship seeks careful consideration and justifies the introduction of postcolonialism to the field. On the other hand, post-colonial scholars are prone to exhibit a secular bias, viewing religion as impervious to critical enquiry. Intellectuals have a vocation to speak the truth to those in power, including ‘the guardians of sacred vision or text’ (Said 1996, 88–89). Fortunately, some postcolonial scholars recognize the critical potential of religion to change the status quo rather than protect it (PSR, 517–518). Still, the relationship between postcolonial scholars and Christian theology remains a complex one.

## 2.2 The contested introduction of gender, race, and sexuality

As much as the adoption of postcolonialism by theologians is not self-evident, the inclusion of the feminist toolbox isn’t either. Said, for instance, does not concern himself with gender at all in his work. This becomes most explicit in his groundbreaking *Orientalism* (2003 [1978]).

In *Orientalism*, Said studies 19<sup>th</sup> century literary representations of the Orient and the Oriental ‘other’. In his terminology, “the Orient” can come to apply to any colonized part of the world. Orientalist discourse assumes an unchanging Orient, and, consequently, an unchanging Oriental, who is absolutely different from the West. Said accuses different generations of orientalists of repeating the idea of an irreconcilable chasm between a superior Europe and Christianity on the one hand and ‘the Orient’ on the other. He places special emphasis on the problematic European attitude towards Islam. In line with Norman Daniel (1993 [1960]), Said traces post-9/11 hostility towards Islam back to the anti-Islamic polemics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance periods. To Europe, he says, Islam, as a monotheistic, cultural and military competitor, has always represented a threat (Said 2004, 51).

Said, then, aims to challenge the authority and the legitimacy of western knowledge and power over the Orient. He explains how the idea of European superiority over Oriental and other peoples and cultures was enforced by Europe’s actual positional superiority from the end of the eighteenth century onward. He discusses how the myth of *the white*



*man's burden*, to undertake a civilizing mission to save the Orient from obscurity, reflects the inherent power imbalance between the West and the Orient. Curiously, when he stumbles upon the gendered dimension to this power imbalance, however, Said (2003, 188) brushes it aside:

Why the Orient still seems to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate: it is not the province of my analysis here, alas, despite its frequently noted appearance.

Said's refusal to analyze Orientalism's 'frequently noted' gendered 'appearance' is unfortunate. The sexualization and feminization of the Orient fits rather smoothly in the general rhetoric of modern Orientalist discourse. In French nineteenth-century novels, the Orient features as 'a guileless young girl', or 'a fatal woman'. Symbolized by the veil of Oriental women, the Orient is said to "conceal a deep, rich fund of female sexuality" (Said 2003 [1978], 182). According to Bryan Turner, this theme of sexuality/sensuality, mysteriousness/accessibility, was "part of the traditional version of oriental society as one dominated by the irrationality of the senses" (1994, 98).

In theology the initial lack of gendered awareness was soon corrected, e. g. by Musa Dube (2000), who argues for the recognition of an interaction of multiple patriarchal structures on colonized women. She distinguishes patriarchal structures on the part of the colonizer as well as the colonized. Colonial systems reduced women to silence, and they did so either by reinforcing indigenous patriarchal systems, or by replacing more flexible indigenous gender systems with rigidly dualistic ones. Postcolonial feminism, as Dube argues, focuses on how women from different backgrounds chart their way through various forms of colonial and indigenous patriarchal structures, as they seek justice and empowerment. Within the field of the theology, we may concur, a postcolonial approach cannot dismiss the analysis of the gendered dimensions of Orientalist knowledge production and colonial systems of oppression as 'speculation'.

Postcolonial feminism studies the complex interactions of different, gendered, racialized, and/or sexualized, forms of inequality and power. Just like the relationship between postcolonialism and theology is uneasy because of the prevailing secular bias in many postcolonial studies, so too, the relationship between postcolonialism and

feminism or gender studies is not unproblematic. White, western feminists are criticized for universalizing Eurocentric and heteronormative frameworks, for replicating the colonial gaze. An exclusive focus on patriarchy is insensitive to the different subject positions of white women and women of color, of heterosexual and homosexual women, of highly and lowly educated women, and so on. The challenge of difference (Kamitsuka 2007) – differences associated with race, with religion, gender, or sexuality, but also uncomfortable differences in what counts as ‘feminist’ – challenges hidden presuppositions of white, western feminist scholars.

### 2.3 The contested relation between postcolonial and liberation theologies

A third uneasy relationship is that of postcolonial and liberation theologies. Inspired by human rights movements and by the liberalizations of the Second Vatican Council, liberation theologies began to emerge in the late 1960s. With Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973 [1971]) as a founding figure, they pointed to the failure of the global economic system to eliminate poverty. Theologies of liberation proclaimed *the preferential option for the poor* as a major if not the central element of the Christian faith. They emphasized orthopraxy over orthodoxy. Latin American liberation theologians introduced the perspective of local Christian communities and their socio-economic circumstances into their ways of doing theology. Through EATWOT, relations were quickly established with theologians in other parts of the world. The *irruption of the poor* gave rise to a variety of theologies of liberation, each focusing on the primary concerns of various particular contexts (cf. Thistlethwaite/Engel 1990).

The oppositional and analytical tools of early liberation theology were largely derived from the social sciences, particularly from Marxist theorizing. By the 1990s it became increasingly apparent that these tools could not be employed effectively in the face of the complexities of the postmodern, globalized world (Keller et al. 2004, 5). Awareness grew of the oppressive mechanisms internal to communities of *the poor and oppressed* and of the unsustainability of clear-cut definitions of national, cultural and sexual/gender identities. This gave way to the realization that simple binary oppositions such as oppressed versus oppressor were questionable.

More controversial, perhaps, is postcolonial theologians' critique of early liberation theology's use of the Bible. They question whether the Bible presents a 'holistic vision of the Reign of God' (Schreier 2002, 17) and whether it can always be used to support the interests of the poor and oppressed. If early liberation theologians, for example, used the biblical Exodus narrative as a paradigm for the liberation of the poor and oppressed of their time, then postcolonial theologians came to criticize the abuse of power in that same biblical narrative, and ask: but what about the Canaanites? (cf. Dube 2000, 58–64). In other words, whereas liberation hermeneutics sought to discover the anti-imperial potential of the biblical narratives, postcolonial biblical scholars – perhaps inspired by feminist theologians' hermeneutics of suspicion – turned their focus to the imperial tendencies of those very texts.

From the viewpoint of liberation theology, postcolonialism's methodological emphasis on ambiguity and ambivalence lacks liberation potential and jeopardizes the praxis of solidarity. As they insist on the ambiguities of power relations, and as they avoid essentialist binary oppositions such as oppressor-oppressed, postcolonial theologians develop a complex view of the intersectionality of gender, religion, race, patriarchy, sexuality and identity. Liberation theologians may object that without clear categories of oppressor-oppressed, perpetrator-victim, liberative action is not possible.

In partial agreement with liberation theologians, Margaret Kamitsuka (2007) uses Spivak's notion of *strategic essentialism* to explain that postcolonialism should not altogether discard labels of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed'. Such labels can be rhetorically appropriate if they serve political, emancipatory purposes. Yet she maintains that, in reality, oppressor-oppressed categories are ambiguous, and that a (poststructuralist) non-totalizing view of oppressive power leaves room for the agency and resilience of victims, for resistant power to break through (Kamitsuka 2007, 89–103).

To be fair, the distinction between liberation and postcolonial theology is at times arbitrary. What's more, as Vitor Westhelle (2010, 144 f.) cautions, both notions fall short as universal labels for the theological voices of subalterns, insofar as they suppress their uniqueness and thereby cannot represent all of these plural voices. And yet the effort to find commonality cannot be given up if their intercommunicability is to be preserved (2010, 145).

## 2.4 The contested relation between theology and religious studies

The final uneasy relation discussed here, is that between postcolonial theology and religious studies. Postcolonial theory has been employed to scrutinize the field of religious studies since the 1990s. How did modern European colonialism and imperialism influence that field of knowledge? Well, postcolonial critics argue, western academia has superimposed an essentially western religious framework onto non-western wisdom traditions. Thus, David Chidester (1996), tells the story of how nineteenth-century missionaries, travelers, and colonial agents could not find religion in his country, South Africa. Their Christian assumptions rendered them incapable of finding religion there. Richard King (1999) concurs that the concept of religion is really a Christian theological category and that it was designed after a rather western distinction between secular and religious spheres of life. King claims that Christian understandings of religion and mysticism helped construct *the mystic East* as Europe's Other. He identifies a tendency in western accounts of eastern religions "to claim to have uncovered the 'essence' of the object under consideration" (King 1999, 92). Such essentialism misrepresents the heterogeneity of religions, and it tends to result in the construction "of a cultural stereotype that may then be used to subordinate, classify and dominate the non-Western world" (ibid). To know is to control.

Postcolonial scholars in the field of religious studies argue that despite the apparent secularization of their field, Christianity still serves as the standard for evaluating other religions and wisdom traditions (c. f. Chidester 1996; King 1999). Kwok Pui-lan (2005, 189) therefore started a conversation between religious studies scholars and Christian theologians on the subject of the interrelationships between the two disciplines as rooted in the nineteenth-century. In her view, Schleiermacher's *Über die Religion* (1799) opened the door for the historical and comparative study of religious traditions, because in it he recognizes the existence of diverse traditions alongside one another. Yet Kwok scrutinizes Schleiermacher's seminal text for its classicist, racist, and gender biases. *Über die Religion* attends to the interests of the upwardly mobile middle class and is racially prejudiced with regard to non-Europeans. Moreover, Schleiermacher uses heterosexual intercourse as a metaphor for the male experience of the world. Most importantly, he adopts a developmental theory of religion, according to which Christianity is considered the most perfect of the most highly developed monotheistic forms of religion,

whereas Judaism is deemed a dead and childlike religion in light of its emphasis on commandments, and Islam is berated as 'still' displaying characteristics of polytheism.

In line with Kwok's argument, Dube also maintains that a colonizing, hierarchical separation of the religions was a general feature of colonial Christianity (Dube 2002, 114; 117). From a Christian viewpoint, other religions and indigenous wisdom traditions were often seen as competing opposites. Kwok and other postcolonial theologians criticize the modern comparative study of religion for supposedly having provided a 'scientific' basis for this linear, evolutionary theory, which sees Christianity as the ultimate fulfillment of other religions (de Jong-Kumru 2013, 93–94).

### 3 Postcolonial theology and the challenge of difference

Having discussed postcolonial theologians' (initial) interdisciplinary conversations, we now use their insights to orientate our look to the horizon, to the future of postcolonial theology in western academia, and in Europe in particular. As indicated at the beginning, this future will continue to be marked by the challenge of difference, two dimensions of which are highlighted here. First, postcolonial discourse confronts us with the challenge and implications of a non-hierarchical view of religious difference (see 3.1). Second, postcolonial theological practice challenges so-called mainstream, western theological discourse to recognize the legitimacy and equality of African, Asian, Latin American and indigenous theologies (see 3.2). Finally, the future challenge of postcolonial theology in Europe is related to an accountability of its, of our, positionality (see 3.3). What does it mean to be in Europe, where – if we speak of deconstructing the binary of 'the west and the rest', of Europe and its Others – we should consider the Shoah as well.

#### 3.1 The challenge of difference in interreligious dialogue

Since the post-1945 worldwide independence movements, the decline of church attendance in mainline denominations, the change of the religious landscape due to immigration, and especially after 9/11, there has been a renewed attention to other religious traditions and Islam in particular. European societies are increasingly pluralistic (Kwok 2005, 197).

The observation that the presence of other religions alongside Christianity is not temporary, evokes the question of how to work for peaceful coexistence among people – in neighborhoods, cities, regions, nations and the world at large. As Aloysius Pieris (1988, 87) already points out:

The irruption of the Third World is also the irruption of the non-Christian world. The vast majority of God's poor perceive their ultimate concern and symbolize their struggle for liberation in the idiom of non-Christian religions and cultures. Therefore, a theology that does not speak to or through this non-Christian peoplehood is an esoteric luxury of a Christian minority.

A theology of liberation, a theology that takes people and their needs seriously, should also take their religions seriously. Now that religious diversity in the West increasingly reflects religious diversity around the globe, Desmond Tutu (2011, 51) maintains, "no religion can hope to have a monopoly on God, on goodness and virtue and truth."

Admittedly, academic approaches to religious pluralism have come a long way from an evolutionary theory. It is no longer self-evident to presume that Christianity is the only true or the most perfect religion. And yet, contemporary Christian theologians who adopt a pluralistic position on other religions, may still consider those in terms of insurmountable differences and/or essential commonalities. Although conversion, crusade and mission are no longer the dominant mode of interaction with other religions, a dialogical approach does not escape postcolonial criticism either.

As a solution to persisting processes of *othering* and *saming*, Jeannine Hill Fletcher (2003) underlines that our identity is always more than just a religious identity. We all have a multilayered identity, which is religiously, socially, ethnically, racially, sexually, geographically or whichever way determined. Therefore, we do not belong to just one group, but to multiple groups. Not all members of a group have the same multiple loyalties. Thus, the multiple loyalties of its members differentiate each group. This way, everyone is part of a web of relations. On another level, even one's religious identity in itself may become hybridized. As people of religious faith migrate to other cultures, they form hybridized religious identities in their new contexts (Kwok 2005, 206). As people of different religious faiths start families together, or as people in secularized societies become religious creatives, they may embrace a sense of multiple religious belonging (Kalsky 2007).

Hybrid understandings of identity move beyond a binary way of thinking in absolute oppositions. However, we must not forget the power differences that still exist between us. “We are all hybrids, but all the hybrids are not equal” (Kwok 2012, 64). If we do claim such equality, we are back to claiming that we are basically all the same. As feminist theologians have complained, women’s voices have insufficient part in interreligious dialogue (King 1998). Likewise, critical insights of feminist theology are conspicuously absent from many Christian theologies of the religions, as much as non-western sources are rarely cited by western feminist theologians. Here, we require more than an extension of the circle of theologians by inviting others to join, as this only underscores existing power inequalities. As Kamitsuka (2007, 150) puts it: a politics of inclusion – where the dominant group offers to include the other – effectively reinforces the privilege of the dominant group. We must be wary of a dialogical praxis that aims at managing religious difference, co-opting Third World elites, and camouflaging real socio-economic differences between western and Third World societies (Kwok 2012, 203).

In western Christian theological discourse, the issue of religious difference is seen as a challenge and a problem. In contexts such as Asia, where Christianity has always been a minority religion, Christian theologians may approach religious difference very differently, less anxiously. Non-western theologians, who do not share the privileged position of white, western theologians, confront theological discourse with its own, internal heterogeneity. Thus, it is after e.g. Jenny Dagers (2013) first takes seriously both feminist and postcolonial theologies in her constructive theological project, that she is then abled and encouraged to return to her western theological tradition to come up not with a universal, but with a particularist theology of the religions, based on trinitarian thought. Likewise, Eleonora Hof’s (2016, 26f.) articulation of a postcolonial imagination of Dutch Christian mission, starts from a “World-Christian turn.”

### 3.2 The challenge of intercultural theology

The difference between the religions, then, is not dissimilar to the differences between members of the different varieties of Christianity. In postcolonial theology, the gravitational shift of Christianity to the global South is translated into the academic practice of theology. A postcolonial

approach enables marginalized voices in theology to advance their own theological claims with equal authority as mainstream, white, western theological constructs (de Jong-Kumru 2013, 149).

In the *contact zone* of intercultural theology, where an ever-greater diversity of culturally and historically situated theologies meet, the *hybridization* of theological notions multiplies. As she imagines a postcolonial Christology, Kwok (2005) discusses five understandings of Jesus/Christ that subvert a traditional, white, latently heterosexual, male image: the Black Christ of the black power movement, Jesus as Corn Mother in Native peoples' struggle for independence, Jesus as the feminine Shakti for Indian women, Susannah Heschel's Jesus as theological transvestite, and Marcella Althaus-Reid's Jesus as the Bi/Christ (Kwok 2005, 168–185; de Jong-Kumru 2013, 148). A fluid, nuanced understanding of identity is needed to accommodate this diversity within theology and Christology.

This understanding of identity as always in flux, stands in tension with postcolonialism's prioritization of modern European colonialism and imperialism. There is a risk here, especially for western postcolonial theologians. As Tinyiko Maluleke (and de Jong-Kumru 2020) explains, postcolonial theology in Africa (and in other formerly colonized contexts) is at once precolonial, postcolonial and futuristic in orientation as it intends to dethrone, not entrench coloniality. For as it deconstructs the foundational pretenses of colonialism – it allows colonialism to be seen as a violent interruption that does not define African reality. If mainstream, western theological discourse is to recognize the legitimacy of African, Asian, Latin American and indigenous theologies as theologies in their own right, then we should be careful not to reify the era of European colonial and imperial rule as the all-defining marker of their contexts.

### 3.3 The challenge of positionality: What is *European* Postcolonial Theology?

As we have seen, a postcolonial approach to the contact zones of interreligious dialogue in faith communities and intercultural theology in academia, centers around collaboration across racialized, gendered, sexual, cultural and religious divides to promote peaceful coexistence. In this search, truth matters, but not as an end in itself. Truth is an instrument to



bring about desired change. Or, as Richard Rorty (1990, 19–40) would say, solidarity is prioritized over objectivity. We don't start with the question What is the truth? but with the question What do we want our societies and our planet to look like? How do we want to live together and with other species on this planet? Truth is not separated from its situatedness, but it is probed for its effects on our communities. Dialogue, then, is not about a search to discover the truth together. Instead of hoping to eliminate ambiguities, a postcolonial dialogue praxis is looking for ways to learn how to tolerate ambiguities.

As the postcolonial toolbox is used by a growing number of theologians in Europe, the challenge is not for European theology to become postcolonial, but for postcolonial theology to reflect its European situatedness. What happens when postcolonial theology comes to Europe? Where refugees are unwelcome today, where Jewish refugees were unwanted a short century ago? Where postwar immigrants from formerly colonized countries were housed in shelters and homes previously lived in by Jews? Where the devastation of the Second World War they had just been freed from did not prevent European nations from fighting the independence of their colonies in long-lasting wars, using tactics they had only just survived as victims? Where anti-Semitic conspiracy theories today, go hand in hand with nationalist, anti-Muslim, racist sentiments? With Michael Rothberg (2009; 2019), we can explore such questions more thoroughly in a multidirectional approach that connects the histories of European colonialism and the Holocaust – as we reflect on our positionality and accountability today.

We have to remember that, historically, Europe is not the civilization that conquers the darkness with its light (cf. Borgman 2015). Rather, Europe has shown itself as a dark and violent continent, where truth was a light that had to hide itself in a cloak of darkness – in the attics of anti-Nazi resistance, or behind giant curtains in the streets of Sarajevo – to survive. And today, Europe's self-identifying narrative as the continent of peace and prosperity since WWII depends on the hidden truths of postwar colonial violence and the invisibility of European abandonment of refugees. The truth we hide in Europe is that our dignity depends on our recognition of the intrinsic dignity of other people (Borgman 2015, 136 f.).

Looking back, I think being in Elmina was so disorienting because it ruptured my sense of positionality. After the experience of reading

and translating old Dutch signs for descendants of the enslaved, it became clear that those signs spoke to me and that I was *implicated* in that history (cf. Rothberg 2019). Also, standing in the Dutch protestant chapel, it became harder to disconnect myself and my faith tradition from the liturgy and theology of the Psalm-singing Dutchmen, who proclaimed God as they hid the truth of those dying in the corner of the dead underneath. To claim that colonial liturgy and theology were an aberration, which contemporary white Protestant theology has nothing to do with – or will overcome, if only we deconstruct it properly/postcolonially – is a form of escapism that does not reflect nor do justice to what happened. We have to account for the fact that after our deconstructive efforts, “the very real possibility of nothingness looms” (Ellis 2015, 60).

As Judith Gruber (2019, 116) warns us, the wish for closure that sustains a linear narrative from wounding to healing, from cross to resurrection, is misleading. She asks theologians to join Spivak’s *prayer to be haunted* by and to scrutinize the wounds – to acknowledge the ongoing suffering – in the aftermath of modern colonialism. Such scrutiny disrupts “the imagination of the cure” that does not bring real transformation (Gruber 2019, 118). Linking Gruber’s insights to Katharina von Kellenbach’s (2013, 25) theological analysis of guilt and denial in Nazi perpetrators, we can concur that, indeed, the Christological paradigm of unconditional forgiveness fails to breach the ideological and theological walls that postcolonial theology wishes to break down. Von Kellenbach therefore proposes a re-interpretation and re-use of the mark of Cain to inspire open engagement with histories that haunt. Such scrutiny of wounds and such open engagement with the oppressive histories in which we find ourselves implicated and entangled, allows postcolonialist theology to remain in its calling as the embodied voice of the prophetic. From the privileged position of those who benefit from the perpetuation of colonial power structures, I wonder: if the ghosts that haunt us reveal to us the wounds of those who suffer the ongoing effects of European colonialism, what do they reveal to us of ourselves?

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