

# From coloniality to interculturality in theology: A Feminist Look at Racism in Religion

Translation

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The central questions that inspire this text are: where can racism be disarticulated today, and from which spheres can we talk about its effects? What are the implications of reflecting on racism in theology from a feminist perspective? These questions invite us to take a critical look not only at the patriarchal realities on which traditional theological thought is based in the West, and therefore also in Latin America, but also to deconstruct the coloniality that sustains racism.

## 1. Coloniality

For Aníbal Quijano (2007), coloniality is one of the specific elements of the global pattern of power. In this sense, for this author, the coloniality of power is fundamental for sustaining a system of classification that passes through all material spheres and subjectivities, affecting everyday life and also on a social scale. A system that legitimises not only the classification of inferiority and superiority of beings, but also of knowledge, visions, ways of life and practices, based on the ideas of race/ethnicity, gender and the control of the relationship with nature.

It is important to note that race is generated in unchosen circumstances and, at the same time, produces aptitudes and invisibilities in historical cultural configurations where there is inequality of power. Quijano (2014) considers that the idea of race, in its modern sense, has no known history before America. Rather, it arose from the colonisers' need to name the relations between Europeans and non-Europeans, the latter being identified from their biological structure not only as different, but also as inferior. During colonial times, the victors acquired the identity of 'Europeans' and 'whites', while the other identities were also associated primarily with skin colour, 'blacks', 'Indians' and 'mestizos'. This whole complex is known as racism.

Moreover, from modern, colonial logic, some human beings, as well as plants and animals, are seen as mere machines. To the extent that, one of these sick human beings is a decomposed object. This means that the effects of coloniality occur not only in the mind, but also in the lived experience of the subjects, in their own bodies. This is why it is important to link the existential expressions of coloniality in relation to the racial experience and the gender experience (Maldonado, 2007).

When talking about the experience inhabited by subjects and their own bodies, Achille Mbembe (2016,33), referring to the subject of race and, consequently, to the birth of the black, linked to the history of capitalism, makes an analysis of race, mainly, from what it means for the bodies that were nominated as black,

starting from the heteroclite, multiple and fragmented reality. Made up of new fragments of meanings of this term until reaching the millions of people trapped in the nets of the domination of race, of seeing their bodies and their thought functioning from the outside; of having been transformed into spectators of something that was and was not their own existence.

Furthermore, the same author states that

el negro fue inventado para significar exclusión, embrutecimiento y degradación, inclusive para significar un límite conjurado y al mismo tiempo aborrecido. En el contexto de la modernidad fue el único ser humano cuya carne fue transformada en cosa y su espíritu, la cripta viviente del capital, en mercancía.

Ante todo, el conquistador europeo blanco logró construir al otro no como semejante a sí mismo, sino como un objeto amenazador del que mejor protegerse, deshacerse o al que, simplemente, habría que someter (Valdez García, 2020). Al tiempo que su pensamiento dualista se encargaba de objetivar los cuerpos de los otros diversos, para controlarlos, también se fijaban modos de relaciones, a través de las cuales se expresaba ese miedo al otro, a la otra. En otras palabras, se puede decir que se potenciaban unos cuerpos en detrimento de la potencia de otros.

## 2. Colonialism in the context of the dualist vision

Colonialism is the fruit of a dualistic perspective of reality, which places the self, one's own culture, at the centre, and the other, in its diversity, is perceived as a threat, a danger to identity, rejected as alien and persecuted. This vision, which originates in Greek dualism, aims at classifying reality and society on the basis of the criteria of superiority/inferiority; hegemonic/subordinate; good/bad; male/female; humanity/nature; normal/abnormal; spiritual/material, etc. The Greek philosopher Aristotle naturalises diversities and legitimises the power of some over others with these words:

"Despotic is that exercised by the master over the slave (first political relationship) and the body over the soul. Regality is that of the king with his vassals and also that of the father over his children (third political relationship). Finally, the political is that which takes place between citizens. Of this type is that between husband and wife (second political relationship), i.e. the authority of the husband over the wife is like that of the magistrate over the citizen. This is also the relationship between intelligence (noos) and appetite (pathetikon morion)" (Deuso, 2005, pp.31-32).

Consequently, "in the relation between male (arren) and female (thely), the former is superior (kraitton) and the latter inferior (cheiron) by nature; the former rules (archon), the latter is ruled (archomenon)" (Aristotle, Politics, 1254b14). It belongs therefore to the male, "to rule (archike) and to the female, to serve (hyperetike)" (Politics, 1260a23).

From this approach, for Aristotle the dualistic division is natural, just as it is natural that one of the two poles rules and the other obeys and is considered the servant of the first. Consequently, women, slaves and barbarians are placed on the same level of subjection to the free Greek male:

Among the barbarians, the woman and the slave have the same status; the reason for this is that the barbarians have no rulers by nature, but among them the conjugal community is a union of a female and a male slave. Hence the saying of the poets: "it turned out that the Greeks ruled the barbarians". (Euripides, apud: Vallejo Serna, 2016, nº 210). Implicando que, por naturaleza, bárbaro y esclavo es una sola y misma cosa. (*Política*, I).

This thought profoundly influenced the Western world, generating various forms of domination, considered natural and legitimate, such as patriarchy, imperialism, dogmatism, absolutism and colonialism.

Colonialism is a form of sustaining imperialism, as in the case of the expansion of the European continent outwards and defines modernity (15th-20th centuries). In contact with other cultures and civilisations (from Africa, America, Oceania), Europe's cultural, ethnic and political supremacy is affirmed, legitimising the enslavement of African and indigenous populations and their consequent colonisation and destruction of their cultures, traditions, ways of life and religions. The inability to relate to "the other" was the cause of countless damages to humanity and of great genocides, whose continuity, presence and consequences are evident to this day. This process is, however, at the service of the exploitation of labour and the control of the production/appropriation/distribution of the products of the colonies, around the capital-wage relationship (Quijano, 2014, 780).

Thus, slavery, legitimised by the concept of race/racism/inferiority, becomes central to the production of wealth and commodities that supplied Europe from the colonies, giving rise to an economic system of production that we know under the name of capitalism.

Racism (slavery) and capitalism are thus the pillars of colonialism and of that cultural/political/economic process that has since developed in Europe: Modernity.

This control of labour, which stems from the invention of the concept of race and racism, is geared to the export of the resources of the colonies, to the production of wealth, and is deeply associated with the rise of capital and the capitalist system.

### **3. The two columns in the service of the colonial system**

Alongside racism, the other pillar of the global power pattern is the question of gender. It is true that domination based on sexual difference is much older than that of race, but the association of the two served to strengthen the colonial and capitalist classificatory system. Thus, if colour is associated with the idea of race, sex becomes central to the definition of gender. Classification by colour is late, as we have seen: "the idea of race is earlier and colour does not originally have a racial connotation. The first race are the Indians and there is no documentation indicating the association of the category Indian with that of colour" (Quijano, 2000, 196). But, during the conquest of America, the term "black", as opposed to "white", two colours, came to define slave and labour relations, specific identities and roles in colonial society. However,

"If colour were race, as sex is to gender, colour would necessarily have something to do with biology or with some differentiated biological behaviour of some part of the organism. However, there is no indication, since there is no evidence, that anything in any of the subsystems or apparatuses of the organism (sexual genital, blood circulation, respiration, liquid filtering, gland production, cell production, tissues, nerves, muscles, neurons, muscles, etc., etc.) has a different nature, configuration, structure, functions or roles according to the colour of the skin, or the shape of the eyes, hair, etc." (Quijano, 2000, 197). (Quijano, 2000, 197).

Racism, as well as the question of gender, do not go beyond a dualistic, oppositional and classificatory vision at the service of the colonial system; decisive elements for the emergence of Modernity and capitalism as systems of global domination. Rita Segato (2016) considers that, at the entrance of the colonial order, which she identifies as a 'world-village', the system of relations that is woven, severing the threads of memory of its members, affecting, in a particular way, the lives of women, through gender relations, determining hierarchies of prestige between masculinity and femininity.

### **4. Colonialism and Christianity**

The alliance between imperial power and Christianity contributed to the establishment of the colonial system. Christianity emerged as an alternative religious movement of social groups dissatisfied with the Roman system of exploitation and Judaic social classification. It was a product of diversity, and its critical stance characterised the actions of its founder, Jesus of Nazareth. In the writings of the first Christian generations, from their own worldview, another ethic is presented that focused on the construction of egalitarian, supportive and inclusive communities. The hegemonic powers unleashed fierce persecutions against the first Christians during the first three centuries of our era, which did not succeed in putting an end to the "disastrous superstition" (*exitiabilis superstitio*, Tacitus, *Annales* 15,44,3). On the contrary, its diversity, which was summed up in the eschatological proposal of "a diverse world", became so attractive that it spread rapidly among the slave half of the empire, which saw in Christianity the possibility of a better life; and successively among the better-off classes, perhaps tired of the lack of values and meaningful proposals of their time. Thus, in barely three centuries, Christianity came to power: first with the Emperor Constantine (306-337 AD) and then with Theodosius (379-395), who made it the state religion (380). This sudden achievement, however, also marked the end of Christian diversity:

Was it the imperialisation of Christianity or the Christianisation of the empire? Probably both at the same time: on the one hand, the Christian message was imperialised and Romanised, as a necessity for survival and inculturation. On the other hand, a slow and progressive Christianisation of the Roman Empire began, which became concrete with Constantine and reached its climax in the Middle Ages. The alliance between political power and Christianity guaranteed the universal scope of the new religion and the support and sustenance of the state, to which it guaranteed its legitimacy. This encounter between the political and the religious represents one of the characteristic elements of Western civilisation, right up to the present day. (Schiavo, 2019, 303).

The alliance with the political power promoted the universalist expansion of Christianity, which also coincided with the expansion of Western European culture. In this way, the missionary dynamic was transformed into a new colonialism, the purpose of which was to bring Christian values to all peoples, because "outside the Church there was no salvation".

The violent imposition of the Christian faith is accompanied by factors of defence and protection of the true faith, in order to achieve religious homogeneity.

- The emergence of the concept of "heresy", which appeared for the first time in the 2nd century, in connection with doctrinal diversity and diversity of thought. The philosophical concept of *hairesis* originally referred to a school of thought gathered around the teachings of a teacher. However, in the conflict with the Gnostics and other heterodox Christian movements, who also considered their truths to be revealed by God, Justin of Leo rejected their beliefs as heresy because of their differences with Roman Christianity. This was a real re-semanticisation of the term, which henceforth came to indicate doctrinal diversities rejected by the hegemonic Christian group as unrevealed and therefore untrue. However, the concept of heresy ended up giving rise to a violent form of rejection of diversities and alternatives within Christianity, which in the centuries to come would have an extraordinary importance in the affirmation of a single theological interpretation and, consequently, of the legitimisation of a certain group in power.
- The second element that characterises Christianity in its universalist expansion is the definition and affirmation of a Christian identity, based on a single doctrine, a single liturgy, a single morality, a single hierarchy and the same social structure. This identification ended up being imposed by force on the conquered populations. The adaptation of Christianity to Roman cultural, social and political structures identified it more and more with the empire. This marriage was so successful that over the centuries the Roman pontiff himself acquired a higher status than the king or political emperor, who became subordinate to him. In the famous theory of the two swords (12th century), the pope declares the supremacy of spiritual power over the temporal, defining the centrality of religion, typical of the Middle Ages. The absolutisation of spiritual power leads to the centrality of the Christian faith in a dangerous and tortuous alliance between faith and power, belief and violence, which will cause no small amount of damage to humanity. In fact, the Middle Ages were characterised by the absolute rejection of diversity, which was historically expressed in the inquisition (persecution of those who did not share Catholic doctrines), in witch-hunting (persecution of women who did not submit to the patriarchal system) and of various other categories of "diverse" people: Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, etc. Diversity is no longer tolerated.
- In the context of colonialism, which is produced by the expansion of the European continent from the 15th century onwards, the affirmation of Europe's cultural, ethnic and political supremacy is accompanied by the affirmation of the superiority also of its religion, Christianity. Christianity will provide the necessary religious legitimisation of the superiority of the white European race in relation to the natives and Africans, as in the following statements: "These barbarians, although, as has been said, not entirely incapable, are nevertheless so little different from the mentally retarded that they seem unfit to constitute and administer a legitimate republic within human and political limits.

Hence they have no proper laws, no magistrates, and are not even capable enough to govern the family. They even lack sciences and arts, not only liberal but also mechanical, and a diligent agriculture, crafts and many other comforts that are even necessary for human life" (Dominican friar Francisco de Vitoria). And Friar Ginés de Sepúlveda will add: "With perfect right the Spaniards exercise their dominion over these barbarians of the New World and adjacent islands, who in prudence, wit and all kinds of virtues and human feelings are as inferior to the Spaniards as children to adults, women to men, as cruel and inhuman people to the very meek, exaggeratedly intemperate to continents and moderate, finally, I am about to say how much like monkeys to men (...). ...) Just war is the cause of just slavery, which contracted by the right of the "loss of freedom and property". This legitimises the enslavement of these populations and the consequent colonisation and destruction of their cultures, traditions, ways of life and religions.

Christianity's alliance with political power came at a high price: the loss of the original social utopia. With the rejection of historical diversities, Christianity has to use its proposal of historical salvation and its specific ethics, which coincide with justice, equity and equality, to refer to another world, diverse, distant, imaginary, which has nothing to do with our reality. By distancing itself from history, Christianity becomes a magical ideology, the "opium of the people", and the dream of social change is only guaranteed by looking to a heaven that has little to do with the earth and to a God who is ever more distant from humanity.

## **5. Colonialism and Vatican II**

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) arose from the need for a new relationship between the Catholic Church and the world, overcoming the classic opposition that had characterised previous centuries. The Church also needed to rethink its overly institutional structure, to rediscover itself as the "people of God" and thus also to overcome the clergy-laity, sacred-profane dualism that had been central until now. This also meant rethinking the relationship with cultures, evangelisation and the very concept of mission.

In the Second Vatican Council, referring to the missionary dimension of the Church, it is considered in terms of the "implantation" of the Church: "The proper end of this missionary activity is the evangelisation and implantation of the Church among peoples or groups where it has not yet taken root" (Ad Gentes, 6), which is made explicit in the following number: "The reason for this missionary activity is based on the will of God, who "wills that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself for the redemption of all", "and there is salvation in no one else". It is therefore necessary that all should be converted to him, having come to know him through the preaching of the Gospel, and be incorporated into him and into the Church, which is his Body, through baptism" (AG, 7). The language is still very ecclesiocentric and self-referential: it leaves the impression of ecclesial expansion, neglecting dialogue with the different cultures which, in the eyes of the Council, must be evangelised, it fails to recognise the good that is already in them. Also unhelpful is the term "implantation", which refers to something that comes from outside, and does not coincide with what is within. The vision of mission in these texts is dependent on a classificatory dualism, and can therefore be seen as limited.

## **6. A new breath of fresh air in the Aparecida document**

The final document of the 5th Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) in Aparecida is a step forward. In this text, the theme of implantation is overcome in order to consider the importance of cultures: "The 5th Conference in Aparecida looks positively and with true empathy at the different forms of culture present on our continent. Faith is only adequately professed, understood and lived when it penetrates deeply into the cultural substratum of a people. In this way, the full importance of culture for evangelisation becomes apparent. For the salvation brought by Jesus Christ must be light and strength for all the longings, the joyful or suffering situations, the questions present in the respective cultures of the peoples.

The encounter of faith with cultures purifies them, enables them to develop their potential, enriches them. For they all ultimately seek the truth, which is Christ (Jn 14:6)" (477). Mission is described here as a necessary dialogue between cultures. But the Christian event is still considered as the true and necessary one for the development of the various cultures. In this sense, the Christian message must be "inculturated" (479), i.e. translated into the symbolic system, the language and the structures that define the cultures to which it is addressed, in order to purify and empower them in their vital dimension. In this we recognise an attitude of superiority of Christianity in relation to other religions and of Western culture in relation to other cultures.

This leads Raúl Fornet-Betancourt to comment: "Inculturation seems to have to assume and work with a meta-cultural or transcultural vision of the Christian message that assures it of a hard, cultural and historically uncontaminated nucleus, since without this supposed cultural extraterritoriality it makes no sense to speak of inculturation as a dynamic of incarnation of a corrective message in cultures (...). To assume transculturality means to assume that there is just such a hard core which must certainly alter cultures, but which they cannot simply alter, but which they can faithfully transmit in their own forms. The danger is that the religion that is the bearer of a transcultural core considers itself transcultural, tending to the absolutisation of its own and, with it, to the relativisation of other traditions" (Fornet Betancourt, 2007, 41-42).

## **7. Interculturality as a proposal for abandoning racism**

Fornet-Betancourt affirms the need to "move from inculturation to interculturality because we see in the latter the alternative that Christianity must take today in the face of the former in order to overcome a paradigm that still binds it to pretensions, attitudes and habits, theoretical and practical, proper to the dominant Western configuration that has historically taken over its possibilities of realisation" (2007, 45). In fact, interculturality implies transcending one's own in order to listen to and savour what is different, in an attitude of respect, welcome and appreciation.

### **In this sense, intercultural practice requires some renunciations:**

- The renunciation of sacralising the origins of cultural or religious traditions, in favour of dialogue and relations with other traditions.
- The renunciation of turning one's own traditions into a scrupulously established and secure religious itinerary. On the contrary, Christian alternatives must also be welcomed in order to understand their relativity and possibility, among others.
- The renunciation of defining its presence in the world from its own "zones of influence" (self-referentiality). This makes it possible to coexist with other influences and relate to them, whether in convergence or divergence.
- The renunciation of defining one's own identities by drawing borders and boundaries between insiders and outsiders. It would be equivalent to overcoming monoculture and defining an identity based on intercultural and interreligious coexistence, in constant reconfiguration.
- The renunciation of defining a common background, a fixed reference of identity. Contextuality requires, on the contrary, to assume constant intercultural and interreligious mutations, and their influences also in the structural organisation, as for example in the transformation of the juridical and pastoral dimensions.
- The renunciation of making unity the ultimate goal of everything, syncretising differences. In fact, unity is not a state but rather a continuous process of pilgrimage and dialogue.

### **At the same time, interculturality is based on a number of principles:**

- There are no absolute reasons - everything is historical and contextualised.
- There is no centre of control, but the margin is the centre.
- No universal, deterritorialised and abstract knowledge - historical and situated understanding of cultures

- There is no single absolute reason (discourse) (supra-human and supra-cultural: a metaphysical law that regulates everything and everyone, annihilating diversities).
- Plurality of knowledge vs. dogmatism and cultural fundamentalism that lead to forgetting and silencing subordinate cultures.
- Symmetrical cultural dialogue, based on the situational diversity of the subjects involved.
- Criticism of asymmetrical situations (dominant, imperialist, colonising, globalising, violent), giving a voice to subordinate cultures.
- Mutual recognition of diversities, pluralities, complexity of reality - not annihilation, levelling, subjugation.
- Finalised to a democratic, egalitarian and ethical coexistence. It is only through interculturality that colonialism can be overcome, also in relation to the mission of the Church, which must thus open itself to intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and to the pluralism of beliefs and religions.

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So that inclusion gives way to recognition and dialogue between peers, as this poem by the Afrofeminist activist Basha Changuerra (2019) puts it: You can't add me to your space.

*You cannot add me to your movement.  
 You can't put me in your sack (or any other).  
 You can't give me some space in your space.  
 By including me you mark me how, you mark the model, you mark the form, you mark the tempo. You can count on me, yes, but by including me you impose the canon.  
 Don't include me, don't give me a voice, don't give me space and don't pass me the microphone.  
 You can count on me, with respect for who I am.  
 Recognising me as an equal, without imposing, without marking, without judging.  
 Look at me, listen to me, ask me, recognise me as I am. Let's share as equals.*