Decolonising Theology Webinar

Greetings everyone, it is wonderful to be here. As you heard, my name is Thandi Gamedze. I am South African - based in Cape Town - and so much of what I will be saying is very much rooted in this context, but I hope that it will have resonance beyond this too. As we are talking about decolonizing theology, I want to begin with some brief context relating to colonisation in South Africa - broadly, as well as specifically relating to the ways in which theology was implicated and entangled in all of this. And then I will get into some thoughts about decolonising theology.

Colonialism, mission, and colonial theologies

South Africa has a long history of colonisation. This began in 1652 with Dutch settlers, who at some point were joined by the British. These two colonising powers - while having various contestations among themselves - both brutalised, oppressed and subjugated the indigenous population, through violent land, cattle and property theft, forced displacement, and enslavement. In 1948 apartheid was introduced by the Afrikaner Nationalist party – descendants of the Dutch colonists – and essentially this regime centralised, formalised, and intensified the various forms of pre-existing racialised oppression.

Importantly, theology was central to all of this history. Christianity in South Africa cannot be understood separate from its introduction via the broader missionary movement. Similarly (recognising of course that there was contestation within this) the missionary movement cannot be seen outside of its colonial entanglements, and the colonial project cannot be understood outside of its religious roots. In this regard, the colonial acquisition of new lands was seen as ‘divine mission’ (Mudimbe, 1988). In many cases missionaries were the forebearers of colonization. As Comaroff describes it, “the Kingdom of God would pave a way for the Empire of Britain” (Comaroff, 1989), or in Cochrane’s words, “the Flag… followed the Cross” (Cochrane, 1987). Seen in its wholeness then, the colonial project began with the ideological through the missionaries, which then paved the way for everything else. In this regard, Comaroff and Comaroff (1989) refer to missionaries as ‘the most ambitious ideological and cultural agents of Empire’ (J. Comaroff & Comaroff, 1989).

In the missionaries’ framing, civilization and salvation were very much inseparable and were seen as material as well as spiritual. Inherent in this of course were particular racialised ideas about who was civilized and who wasn’t and why (Cochrane, 1987). In this regard, for the Europeans a point of departure was their superiority in relation to the Africans. Within this framing, the work of so-called civilization or salvation touched on all aspects of life, as the missionaries sought to convert the indigenous population into their own ‘more civilised’ image. This extended to culture, language, consciousness, spirituality, gender roles, dress, even agricultural practices - in the Comaroff’s words, “no habit being too humble, no sign too insignificant to be implicated in the battle (J. Comaroff & Comaroff, 1989)”. In line with this,

Mudimbe points out that the mission of the missionaries was far “more complex than the simple transmission of the Christian faith” and involved a whole programme of “cultural propaganda, patriotic motivations, and commercial interests” (Mudimbe, 1988).

The theologies that enabled, justified and even necessitated these dynamics were things like beliefs about divinely ordained superiority (which was of course racialised, gendered, and classed), the connected idea of election or chosenness, ideas about divine blessing, and divine curse, ideas like the doctrine of discovery etc.

Importantly, these theologies continue to persist. They persist in lands that remain colonised such as illegally occupied Palestine, where the state of Israel is said to be God’s chosen and therefore its occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine are understood to be divinely sanctioned and supported. They also persist in lands like South Africa that are considered to be post-colonial - a label which is very much contested given the continued oppressive racialised, classed and gendered realities. Importantly, churches continue to uphold colonial theologies that function to reproduce these colonial realities.

In South African black theologian Itumeleng Mosala’s words, part of the reason for the persistence of these dynamics is that we haven’t properly audited colonialism, apartheid and oppression, and have failed to ‘sign the divorce papers’ on colonial theology. The first section of this talk has perhaps been an attempt to audit colonialism, apartheid and oppression in South Africa specifically, particularly in terms of its impact on theology. The next section aims to be an attempt to think about how we might go about the hard and ongoing work of ‘signing the divorce papers’ on colonial theology, drawing on lessons from Paulo Freire, the South African Kairos document, Itumeleng Mosala, and liberation theologies broadly.

Signing the divorce papers on colonial theology

Rejecting the blank slate – a pedagogy for decolonisation

A central part of colonisation’s modus operandi is the assumption (or pretense) of a blank slate. This assumption or pretense happens in terms of land - such as the erroneous idea of ‘a land without people, for a people without a land’ that operated to justify the colonisation of Palestine, as well as various other iterations of this discursive, legalized, and often spiritualised erasure of indigenous people in other sites of settler colonial occupation. Of course, these lands were never empty lands without people, but this pretense of a blank slate or an empty land justified and made possible the subsequent colonisation. Ideological colonisation operates similarly, with an assumption that the mind (particularly that of the marginalised, oppressed or colonised, but beyond this too) is a blank slate onto which various scripts can be written. Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire powerfully critiques this blank slate or empty vessel assumption, outrightly rejecting it as false, and also recognising the ways in which this idea functions to domesticate and recolonise the colonised and crush their sense of agency.

This too is how colonial theology operates, with certain people pictured as having a divine claim on theology and direct access to God, while others are the empty vessels - the blank slates - who must be filled with the expert's theology.

Paulo Freire termed this kind of pedagogy banking education, where knowledge is simply deposited by experts into the empty minds of recipients. He made the argument that even revolutionary ideas will fail to change the unjust structures of society as long as they are held hostage to these kinds of pedagogies. As an alternative, Freire proposed what he called problem posing education which was deeply dialogical, recognised the agency, the knowledge and the wisdom brought by each person, and disrupted the binary of teacher and student, arguing that in such a process, each person is at times both teacher and student, shaping and being shaped.

In a similar way, the process through which the South African Kairos document was produced challenged the colonial banking education which was very present within the church. As a brief background, the Kairos document was a theological document produced in 1985 apartheid South Africa in the midst of political crisis and repression. It was framed as a challenge to the church, naming and critiquing what we might refer to as the colonial and apartheid theologies emerging from the church of the time, playing key roles in upholding the oppressive status quo. Importantly, the document was developed through a deeply dialogical and participatory process that it called 'people's theology'. People's theology rejected the idea that only experts or theologians could do theology, but democratised the process of 'theologising', making the argument that everyone can do theology – and that in fact the theological voices that should be taken particularly seriously are those which are often ignored in trained theological circles, those on the margins who bear the brunt of the systems of oppression and injustice.

Conversations about and work towards decolonising theology must take this kind of pedagogical imperative seriously.

Bible as site of struggle and struggle as lens

The second key to decolonising theology is taken from Itumeleng Mosala's work in the 80's and beyond. While the critique of many liberation theologians in South Africa stopped at the church and its harmful theologies, Mosala subjected the bible itself to serious scrutiny. Instead of simply blaming bad theologies on misreadings of the text and poor hermeneutics, Mosala argued that the bible itself was a site of struggle, holding texts and realities of both oppression and liberation. Within this, Mosala believed that the bible could be read towards liberation – and in fact that it could be a powerful tool within struggles for social justice – but only if the struggles present within its texts and pages were recognised, named and read in light together with the struggles of our times. In his view, the failure to recognise and name the power imbalances and oppressive realities within the text results in a reproduction of those same dynamics in these times.

While seeing the bible as a site of struggle was Mosala's particular contribution, I believe that his work also offers a broader tool for the work of decolonising theology, which is the imperative to read everything through the lens of struggle or power. When everything contributing to theology – the world of the text, the text itself, the contemporary context etc. – is read through this lens, systems of power and oppression are made visible in a way that allows them to be read and appropriated towards a decolonial vision for the world, characterised by just relations between all beings. Those seriously desiring to decolonise their theology must begin to read everything through the lens of struggle.

Re-politicising and de-neutralising theology and scripture

The third key to signing the divorce papers on colonial theology that I want to highlight comes from the Kairos document. The document recognises two distinct apartheid sustaining theologies emerging from the churches of the time – namely state theology and church theology. While state theology was overt in its appropriation of scripture, biblical concepts, and the name of God towards the upholding of injustice, church theology was much more covert. Church theology, while theoretically opposed to apartheid, functioned to uphold it through its failure to analyse, recognise, and name the roots of the injustice or its systemic nature. Central to church theology was an idea that the church should be neutral and apolitical. The Kairos document challenged this so-called neutrality and apoliticality, calling the church to a prophetic theology which was unafraid to clearly and decisively take a stance and name and denounce the powers of injustice and oppression for what they were. This is akin to Archbishop Desmond Tutu's powerful words that "if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor".

Importantly, this kind of so-called neutrality and apoliticality of church theology is enabled through a neutralising and depoliticising of the gospel. Jesus' crucifixion was deeply political. It was a response from the powerful in society to a situation in which their power was being challenged and the social order being put in jeopardy. Read in this way, Jesus' murder can be likened to the murders of others who challenged power – like Steve Biko, the founder of the black consciousness movement killed in detention by the apartheid state, like Imam Haron, a key anti-apartheid figure within the Islamic liberation theology tradition, also killed in detention by the apartheid state, like John the Baptist, another who challenged the social order of his time and disrupted the balance of power. And of course many others whose subversive prophetic witness put them in danger with the authorities. When Jesus' death is removed from its social and political context, rather than Jesus' crucifixion being seen a response from the powerful to their power being questioned and destabilised, it is instead reduced the individual and the spiritual, with no implications for the here and now – for actual real life good news for the poor, actual freedom for those who are imprisoned, actual liberation for the oppressed, actual reordering of the power structures and relations in such a way that they lead to life and flourishing rather than death.

A decolonised theology – like the gospel – cannot be neutral, must be political, and must advocate for the vision that Jesus held front and centre – the extremely political vision of the year of Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favour.

Locating God with the oppressed

Finally, in thinking about what signing the divorce papers on colonial theology looks like, I think a key lesson that we can learn from liberation theologies more broadly relates to the question of where our theologies locate God. The typical hegemonic hierarchical order that we find ourselves in is one in which those with more social/political/economic power are at the top, and the majority with very limited power are at the bottom – with various gradations of this existing between the extremes. Often in such an arrangement, God is seen at the top of this hierarchical order – close to the rich and powerful, blessing and even responsible for their wealth and power, and divinely ordaining the social order, tacitly legitimizing its unequal and oppressive nature. Liberation theology refuses this divine sanctioning of exploitation and oppression, declaring God to be on the side of the oppressed and locating God wherever the oppressed are, always actively engaged in their struggle for life, justice, and liberation.

The Black Jesus painted by Ronald Harrison in apartheid South Africa in 1962 was a powerful theological intervention which did exactly this. Through its depiction of Jesus as black and painted in the likeness of anti-apartheid activist, Albert Luthuli, the painting unequivocally communicated that Christ, that God, was not just located with the oppressed, but even that God was the oppressed. Additionally, through its depiction of the Roman soldiers crucifying Jesus depicted in the likeness of key figures in the apartheid state, the painting made the argument that apartheid's brutalizing, exploiting, oppressing and killing of black people in South Africa was, in effect, crucifying Christ.

I end with a poem that I wrote in this liberation theology tradition of locating God with the oppressed, called 'God is getting tired'.

It's clear that God is getting tired
They worked so hard to keep that child alive under the rubble
For six days until she was rescued
But then They couldn't save her from that 2000-pound bomb

It's clear that God is getting tired
They spent so much energy keeping a mother and her twins healthy
Through an entire pregnancy and birth amidst a genocide
But as They took a breather thinking that the hard work was over
All three were killed in an airstrike

It’s clear that God is getting tired
They worked around the clock keeping a man who had lost three limbs alive
And it seemed that he was out of the woods
When the hospital was bombed and the building collapsed on top of him

It’s clear that God is getting tired
The prayers are not even reaching Them anymore
There’s just so many that They have simply given up
Like when you reach a certain level in Tetris
And the blocks start coming so fast
And for a time, you frantically move around the pieces in an attempt to maintain a semblance of control
Until at some point you just put up your hands in defeat
Recognising that the end is inevitable and there is nothing more you can do

It’s clear that God is getting tired
That God is tired
That God has been tired for twenty horrifying months
For 76 horrifying years
God is tired and defeated and They’ve decided that it’s time
To vacate Their home in the sky and move down to a tent in Gaza

God is there now
Ready to die alongside Their people
In Israel’s next airstrike